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AN ESSAY ON EROTICISM AND LOVE IN ANCIENT CHINA

ÉTIEMBLE

PROFESSOR AT THE SORBONNE, PARIS

TRANSLATED BY JAMES HOGARTH

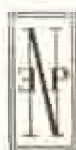
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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*After the international success achieved by the first seven volumes of «Unknown Treasures» — KAMA KALA, ROMA AMOR, EROS KALOS, SHUNGA, CHECAN, SARV-E NAZ and RATI LILA — we now present the eighth volume in the series, on erotology in ancient China.*

*The Chinese expression YUN YU (literally «clouds and rain») comes from the legend of the Lady of the Mountain of Shamans and refers allusively to the sexual act. The publication of the book bearing this title represents the culmination of five years of research and preparation, and we should like to express our sincere gratitude to Professor Etiemble — whose name is sufficient guarantee of the outstanding quality of the analysis—for his close and constant cooperation throughout its production.*

*We are grateful to M. Etienne Dennery, Administrateur Général of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, for kindly allowing us to reproduce certain documents under his charge. Our thanks are also due to those private collectors—MM. Charles Ratton and Lucien Biton of Paris, Mr Wang Fang Yu of New Jersey and Mr J.L. Chen of Hongkong—who have made available to us some of their treasures.*

*Finally we should like to thank MM. M. Girard and H. C. Tseng for their valuable advice.*





## I. THE FLUTE OF JADE

It was 1928, and I was nineteen. Raw provincial that I was, with the corners just beginning to be rubbed off after six months in Paris, I was coming to realise why I had been so oppressed by the humdrum domestic round in my native Brittany, by the inescapable presence and censorious eye of my elders. For at last I had begun to see that the life of the flesh, tainted as it was by Judaeo-Christian interdicts, was not — would never be — open to the nephew of the curé, to a choirboy such as I had been, reluctantly and without vocation, until the age of eighteen; and I found myself drawn by a curiosity which was emotional rather than intellectual, and as irresistible as it was indiscreet, towards an anthology of love poems in which I hoped to find a balm for my rebellious spirit. In the *ghazals* of Hafiz and the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, in Lucian's *Dialogues of Courtesans* and the love songs of the Hoggar, in the *Garden of Caresses* and the *Garland of Aphrodite* I pursued my personal quest for truth, seeking that heavenly eros which I had read about in Plato and which I suspected could be attained only on earth.

Lucian's Greek flute-girls, clad in all the glamour which I drew from my books, were the standard against which I measured the tarts and prostitutes of my own day. Had I been a shade less ingenuous I might have pictured for myself, behind Lucian's scene with the flute-girl, the same disorder and vulgarity as in our modern brothels: instead of breaking Parthenis' flute the customers now wrecked the player piano, but otherwise nothing had changed. I still, however, had enough of the spirit of



Christianity to give a whore an extra five-franc note, if I happened to have one to spare, in the belief — a belief which was necessary to me — that this would put her in a position to turn away at least one client. Thus the Greek flute-girls, being associated in my mind with prostitution, had a no less disturbing effect on my imagination than the recollection of my first schoolboy visits to the brothels of Rennes, Saint-Brieuc, Nantes or Laval.

But now consider a different scene. A Chinese girl, clad in delicate tones of pink and green, stands with her back to a blossoming tree — a peach-tree, or a plum-tree, or perhaps a cherry — in which two birds are perched, evidently billing and cooing. She is playing a flute which is coloured a darker green than her dress; clearly, it seems to me, it is the green of jade. While the scene described by Lucian called up a picture of life in a house of ill fame, the Chinese flute-girl — reproducing, no doubt, a theme borrowed from the painting of the Ming or Ch'ing period — contained for me the very essence of a rustic idyll. This was the first poem:

#### AS I WAS WALKING

In black lines the wild geese fly across the sky: abandoned nests can be seen in the trees. The mountains seem to weigh down more heavily. By the fountain I found the flute which I had lost in summer: the tall grass had concealed it from our searching. But the grass is dead, and this evening your flute gleamed in the sun. I remembered our love, which remained for so long buried under our scruples.

I was struck by the grace of the symbolism, and particularly by its innocence — that innocence which Laurent Tailhade calls the first make-up of youth: *Innocence, ô le premier fard!* As a child I had been obsessed by the refrain of the old French song, *J'ai perdu le do de ma clarinette, ah! si papa y savait ça, tra-la-la!*, though I could never make up my mind how far there was something obscene, or at least equivocal, about the imagery. The clarinet was still suspect in my eyes when I came across this flute from China made from precious stone. It not only freed me from my obsession with the clarinet: it helped to efface another painful recollection of my youth — the plump and fleshy figure of one of my aunts, a woman without a note of music in her head, whom her husband (a great lover of music — and, as I was to discover much later, not only of music) had cast in the role of domestic flute-player.





The Chinese were of course the Celestials, the Sons of Heaven. It followed, therefore — why had it not occurred to me before? — that Chinese women were the Daughters of Heaven, the celestial products of a celestial empire. And at once my little Chinese girl, who aroused in me a pang of futile desire, became the image of the heavenly eros I was seeking.

Oh the bliss of ignorance! Throughout the next few years this picture — the purity of the jade, the blossoming fruit trees, and the figure of a Chinese girl chastely playing her delicate instrument — helped me to throw off the burden of baptism, that token which my uncle the curé had assured me left an indelible imprint on all who received it.

Many readers of the *Flute of Jade* have — I hope and fear — misconceived its meaning just as I did. Lacking even the rudiments of Chinese, I could make nothing of the symbol of the flute, and accordingly I missed the significance of the introductory poem.

I remember that in 1929 I enrolled as a student at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris with the object of learning Chinese; but I should be hard put to it to recall the day, or even the year, when I



first realised the precise meaning of the flute of jade. None of my teachers threw any light on the special vocabulary to which it belonged: I had to stumble on the knowledge for myself, haphazardly, in the course of my reading. For the schoolboy who had picked up in his ten years as a boarder in a *lycée* a store of rich and colourful jargon which was for all practical purposes unusable outside our own barbarian circle, it was a delight to see these words becoming purified into this precious stone, this jade. To the *yu-men*, the doorway of jade, corresponds the *yu-ti*, the flute of jade, on which a woman can play with her fingers and her lips, with the same purity that I found in the Daughter of Heaven, clad in her appealing green and pink dress, in the frontispiece of my *Flute of Jade*. I learned also that in the vocabulary of the Taoist philosophers the female sexual parts are known as the "field of cinnabar" (*tan-t'ien*).

In Chinese thinking, a *tan-hsin*, a "heart of cinnabar", is a pure heart. Although cinnabar, associated as it is in the alchemy of Taoism with the drug of immortality, is itself a substance of high price, it may be suspected that the image also contains some trace of a realistic vision, or at least some element of poetic realism, since the red colouring of cinnabar may have something of the same connotations as the "pink and black jewel" of our poetry and erotic imagery. But is the *tan-hsin*, the "pure heart", the "heart of cinnabar", in fact a realistic image? Since the Chinese term *yu-men*, "gateway of jade", meant the vulva — a symbolism which was entirely incompatible with the image of a "pink and black jewel" — and since moreover both jade and cinnabar, in association with the heart, conveyed the idea of purity, there could be no further room for doubt. The Chinese use of cinnabar and jade in reference to the male and female sexual organs was a condemnation not only of the languages but of the manners of the West.

The full extent of our defilement was brought home to me when I looked up the terms *yu-men*, *yu-ti* and *tan-t'ien* in Mathews' dictionary — a work designed for scholars, not for schoolboys. Mathews, the Protestant missionary, cannot bring himself to name these *things*, these *you-know-whats*, these objects of scandal, these natural vessels, these supernatural birds, these gateways and flutes of jade. Yet for those who have been repelled by the coarseness of some of our Western terms what a pleasure it is to discover that the prostate is known in Chinese as the "gateway of destiny", the seminal vesicles as the "gateways of life"; that a woman's menstrual periods become the "fluid of the peach-blossom",



and that our crude terms for sexual union are replaced by the "fountain of jade"! Among the many Chinese terms for coitus I am glad to find several which contain poetic allusions: thus the "camp of Wu" and the "flowery war" refer to an anecdote recounted by the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien. On the same principle we find a literary allusion used to designate the love of male for male — *tuan-hsiu*, "cutting the sleeve off". The last Emperor of the Former Han, who reigned from 6 to 1 B.C. and was renowned for his boy lovers, found himself obliged one day to leave his bed and give audience at a time when the favourite of the moment lay asleep on the sleeve of the Imperial gown. To waken the sleeping boy was not to be thought of: the Emperor drew his arm out of the sleeve and cut it off so that the sleeper should not be disturbed.

We must of course avoid falling into the trap which besets the explorer and beware of taking this vocabulary too literally. The Chinese too have their coarse expressions and their obscenities: thus under the Manchus the word for "turtle" became taboo as a symbol for the male member. Yet it is agreeable to find, alongside terms of this kind, large numbers of expressions no less graceful than the





*faire catleya* of Proust's Swann and Odette. For we must always remember that when a man drinks at the "fountain of jade" he is using two words, "fountain" and "jade", each of which expresses a form of purity. The Chinese religion had seen the truth that love and sexual pleasure are things in themselves pure.

I concluded that in order to comprehend Chinese erotic thought it is necessary at the outset to get rid of our Western conception of sin, of the tendency to see in the flesh, regarded as absolutely bad, and the spirit, regarded as absolutely good, two irreconcilable opposites. The comparison of the sexual organs of man and woman with cinnabar and jade is entirely right and proper.

No doubt even a brief examination of the Chinese terms referring to love and sexual pleasure will reveal certain words and images suggesting that genital and carnal activities are experienced and interpreted in the same way as in the West — though surely this is hardly matter for surprise. Thus the Chinese expression for a stallion mounting a mare, *tiao ma*, uses the term *tiao*, which means "jump" as well as "mount" — a metaphor which is found also in the sexual terminology of the West. Similarly the Chinese use of the term *shang ma*, "ride", in an erotic sense has its counterpart in our everyday vocabulary. Nor is it very surprising to observe that the idea of shooting an arrow or firing a shot has the same figurative significance in Chinese as in other languages; and our references to candles and their wicks are matched by such Chinese expressions as "light the big candle" (make love normally) and "touch off the big candle" (make love *a tergo*).

It is interesting, too, to observe that the Chinese use the term *kiao-wei* ("mingling their tails") for the mating of birds, and that the word *kiao* is also applied to humans in such expressions as *kiao-huei* and *kiao-ho*, in which *huei* and *ho* convey the sense of "harmony, union". The expression *kiao-tsieh* emphasises the idea of union, already contained in *kiao*, and means something equivalent to communion. Combined with the word *hsing*, "sexual organ", *kiao* is used to refer to coitus, the act of sexual union. Certain other terms are also obvious enough: thus *yang feng*, "point" (for the male organ), and *jou ku*, the "instrument of flesh" (a rather coarse expression), contain an imagery which is familiar in our Western languages. If the character *je* ( 𪚩 ) is regarded as obscene this is no doubt because the actual form of the character seems a little too explicit, being a combination of *ju* ( 入 ), "enter, penetrate", with *jou* ( 肉 ), "flesh".















But certain other terms are of more consequence for our present purpose, since they may guide us towards a distinctively Chinese conception of the sexual act. We may consider, for example, the term *fung-yun* (*fung*, "wind", plus *yun*, "cloud"), or *yun-yu* ("cloud" plus "rain"), which are interpreted with the aid of a poetic legend. It is said that a certain prince who was on his way to the Mountain of Shamans (in eastern Szechuan) fell asleep, worn out by his journey, and saw in a dream a woman of surpassing beauty, who revealed herself to be the Lady of the Mountain. After they had made love she took her leave, declaring: "I am she who brings the clouds in the morning; I am she who calls up the rain of evening." This story is told to explain the use of the expression "clouds and rain", with its very obvious symbolism, for the sexual act — the "clouds" being the female secretions and the "rain" the male emission. Obvious as the symbolism may be, however, the expression would have no meaning for us in a literal translation. In Chinese this figurative sense of "rain" is taken for granted. This is illustrated by the way in which an ingenious play on the word advanced the career of a shrewd and unscrupulous woman who became one of the most celebrated and powerful of all the Daughters of Heaven. (Admittedly there was little enough of the Daughter of Heaven about her, in the sense which I had chosen to give to that expression: a Messalina would have been nearer the mark). Wu Tse-t'ien was only a *tse-t'ien* at the Imperial court (that is, one of the twenty-seven concubines of the third rank) when — the Emperor T'ai-tsung having fallen sick — she set out to seduce the heir to the throne, Kao-tsung. One day when the prince was going to the closet it was Wu Tse-t'ien who knelt to hold the basin in which he performed his ablutions. By way of thanks the prince threw a few drops of water on the girl's face, with the words, "Pure water I sprinkle on the powdered face." To which the girl, already implacably ambitious, gave the ready answer: "Rain from the prince is dew for me." Although the expression *yu-lu* ("rain and dew") has the general meaning of "the Emperor's favour", the terms *yu* ("rain") and *lu* ("dew") also have the very specific sense of "seminal fluid". The challenge to the prince was quite explicit: Wu Tse-t'ien was offering herself to him. Kao-tsung took her at her word — a decision which he later had cause to rue.

One of the words I have cited, *yang feng* (with its variant *yang wu*, the male instrument), guides us towards the paired words *yīng-yang*, which lead to the heart of Chinese erotic thought. *Yin yang chih tao*, the Way of *yīn* and *yang*, is the Chinese phrase for coitus; and one of the most celebrated maxims of





ancient Chinese philosophy, *i yin i yang che wei tao*, "A period of *yin*, a period of *yang* — such is the *tao* (i.e., the order of the world)", demonstrates that the sexual relationship between male and female, the act of coitus between man and woman, is quite without the inborn taint which it bears in our civilisation, expressing as it does the same harmony as we find in the alternation of day and night, of winter and summer. The vigorous employment of the *yang feng*, the male instrument, in the shady valley or the field of cinnabar — that is the true order of the world, that is the proper pattern of life!







It is instructive to see with what simplicity the people of China, two and a half thousand years ago, celebrated the sports of love in their folk songs. Marcel Granet has told us how in the peasant communities of that period the young men and girls were accustomed in summer to form up in two parallel lines facing one another and exchange teasing verses:

#### THE WITHERED LEAVES

Withered leaves! Withered leaves!  
See how the wind is blowing you!  
Come, sirs! Come, sirs!  
Sing, and we shall join with you!\*

\* The verses followed by an asterisk are from Marcel Granet's *Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine*, Paris, Alcan, 1926; 2nd edition, Paris, Leroux, 1929.



And what freshness and innocence we find in the following poems:

THE CHEN AND THE WEI

The Chen and the Wei  
Have overflowed...  
The boys and the girls  
Are coming to the orchids.  
The girls invite them:  
"Shall we go there?"  
The boys reply:  
"We are just back from there."  
"That may well be,  
But why not go again?  
For over the Wei  
How green is the grass!"  
Then the boys and the girls  
Make sport together...\*





#### WITH KILTED SKIRTS

If you have thoughts of love for me  
Then I shall kilt my skirts and cross the Chen.  
But if you have no thoughts for me  
Are there not other men?  
Most foolish of the young fools indeed!\*

When we read in the Confucian glosses that a licensed procurer kept a record of love matches between young men and girls of the ordinary people, in much the same way as was done at court, with a "red brush", we can only smile and shake our head.

Dances and singing of this kind relieved the monotony and austerity of everyday life, and were the prelude to transient unions which might sometimes prove durable. But this did not always lead to a happy ending:

Three long years I have been your wife:  
Never free from household chores,  
Up at dawn, late to bed,  
Not a single moment's leisure!  
And yet for all these three long years  
Cruelly you have treated me:  
This my brothers must not know!  
When I was a maiden you made much of me,  
With voice and laughter paid court to me,  
Plighting your faith as clear as the dawn!  
I little thought that you would change:  
That you would change I little thought!  
Now all is at an end: alas!\*

Nevertheless, it seemed to me that ancient China was fortunate at least in its freedom from the sexual prejudices of the Judaeo-Christian world.



觀八陣





俄而翠娥舉燭至生與大發拽娥登牀盡展其未展之翠  
翠娥樂甚秋波不能凝朱唇不能啓盎然滿面春不復為  
嬌羞態矣既罷姐妹笑語不覺聞鷄鳴之聲次夕生復聚  
三姬之室遂設為同床會生狎巧珠一再三推阻連城翠  
娥共按玉肌逼生大展佳興巧珠愁思形于顏色生曰我  
心惻然姑舍之翠娥笑曰人間樂事皆從苦痛中博來今  
郎憂人之憂則吾妹何得樂人之樂生與復戲曰無煩二  
妹自與巧珠綢繆軟款溫存護持痛惜自是而情少溢矣

又見一道院甚壯麗生造焉適有女婦在內一婦似初  
身未鵲素慈眉嬌態淡映春雲雅態幽閑光霽秋月似西  
子之淡粧宛文君之新寡一女年正及時華鬢飾玲瓏珠  
玉綠衣襖雅麗驚俗一點唇朱如櫻桃之九熟双描眉秀  
慧御柳之新鈞露紋錦之絳裙恍新款之飛燕一女年景  
幼容嫵媚柳腰輕盈層波細剪明眸玉圓凝素對翠  
梧鶯語金蓮小紅袖驚綃玉笋長對月而仙子凌波双洛  
神侍是數人環列左右生竊視之曰蕩心馳自以為奇遇



鞋盃流飲









挽裾求合





秋韮戲狎





八俊淫樂





解衣交頸





雞溫京卿



公看色相



公看色相



公看色相









## II. A SIMPLE YOUNG GIRL

Pleased with my discovery, I toyed with the idea of writing a thesis on "physical culture and metaphysics in Chinese philosophy". I was thinking of physical culture in the widest sense of the term, including physical culture of a sexual character, which I had already perceived to be bound up with the main concepts of Chinese cosmogony and logic — *yin*, *yang* and *tao*. Soon, however, the publication of Henri Maspero's essay, *Les Procédés de nourrir le principe vital dans la religion taoïste ancienne*, convinced me that I had been right in thinking of this subject, but showed me at the same time how inadequate were my resources for tackling it.

These years of my life gave me a certainty which I have never lost; and further experience has merely confirmed that this certainty can aid us, in conjunction with the medical teaching of quite recent years, to attain that particular form of happiness — the happiness of the flesh — for want of which we are compelled to fall back on money, the empty vanities of the world, religion, the lust for power or the acceptance of powerlessness. Accustomed as I was to living in a world in which the pleasures of sex offended against the proprieties and the moralising which, directly or indirectly, hedges in all genital activity, I discovered that there is no better assurance of happiness than the feeling that we are contributing to the cosmic order by making love with all the ingenuity and ingenuousness we can muster. What a delight it was to read in a *Treatise of the Bedchamber* the following dialogue between the Yellow Emperor, who is supposed to have taught men all their various skills, and the Simple Young Girl, his initiator:



"The Yellow Emperor asked the Simple Young Girl: 'My spirit is weak and my mind disturbed; my heart is sad, and I live in perpetual anguish. What can I do to remedy my state?'

"The Simple Young Girl replied: 'All weakness in man comes from an untoward use of the carnal act. Just as water is victorious over fire, so woman is superior to man. Those who are skilled in dalliance are like good cooks, who have the art of mingling the five savours in a single tasty brew. Those who know the art of *yin* and *yang* can combine the five pleasures; those who are ignorant of it die prematurely, never having drawn any real pleasure from dalliance. Must we not be forearmed against this risk?'"

This was also the view expressed by Master Tung-hsuan in his *Art of Love*:

"Man is the most sublime of all creatures born of Heaven. Of all that appertains to man, nothing can be compared with sexual union; reflecting the harmony of Heaven and Earth, it regularises the *yin* and governs the *yang*. Those who understand its true meaning can nourish their being and prolong their life; those who do not will do themselves harm and shorten their days."

Thus one of the oldest, the richest and the most prolific civilisations in the world asserts religiously that it is a good thing and an act of piety to make love, to make love skilfully, artistically, passionately. For is not Heaven doing just this, overlying Earth as the male overlies the female, warming her with his heat and making her fruitful with his fluid, the rain? In contemplating these matters I felt myself far away from our story of Eve and her snake and the poisoned apple of love.

Fortified by these principles, which were merely a restatement of the views evolved by Chinese speculative thought in its earliest days, Master Tung-hsuan was able, with no feeling of self-consciousness, to lay down a pattern of sexual education in which the achievement of proper standards of skill promoted not only pleasure but morality and religion as well. His teaching was much in advance of the book by Dr Van de Velde, *Perfect Marriage*, which was the work most eagerly consulted in Europe about 1930 by those seeking to escape from the squalor and ignorance to which the dogmas and prejudices of their civilisation condemned them. For Van de Velde still found it necessary to leave in the obscurity of Latin the prescription given by Van Swieten to his august client, the Empress Maria Theresa: *Praeterea censeo vulvam sacratissimae majestatis diutius ante coitum esse titillandam*. Master Tung-hsuan, on the other hand, writes in vernacular Chinese when giving advice designed to serve



洞房花燭





the same purpose, addressed not to an unsatisfied empress but to the mass of ordinary mortals who needed help in their quest for happiness:

"When a man and a woman are enjoying union for the first time, the man must sit on the left and the woman on the right. The man then crosses his legs and takes the woman on his knee. He presses her slender waist, caresses her precious body, murmurs tender words and declares his passion. When at last the two are in unison they kiss and embrace, body to body, the lips of the one pressed against the lips of the other. Or the man may catch the woman's tongue in his mouth, gently nibble her lips, take her head in his hands or pinch her ears. This caressing and kissing prepares the way for a thousand delights, and all cares are put to flight. Then the man invites the woman to grasp the stem of jade, while with his right hand he strokes the gateway of jade."

At this point the proprieties of our sexually barbarous civilisation prevent me from quoting any more of Master Tung-hsuan's account, which now proceeds to a detailed description of the thirty variations, with their very picturesque designations. From the four basic postures are derived twenty-six modifications — the "unwinding of silk", the "coiled dragon", the "union of kingfishers", the "fluttering of butterflies", the bamboos by the altar", the "two dancing phoenixes", the "galloping charger", the "leap of the white tiger", the "cat and mouse in the same hole", and so on. All these names are well matched to such images as the "terrace of jade", the "veins of jade", the "channels of gold" and the "examination chamber", which are applied to the intimate details of a woman's body.

Master Tung-hsuan then gives his male readers a piece of advice for which all women would be grateful to him if they had read this classic of the art of love: "When the man feels himself on the point of achieving the supreme pleasure he must always wait until the woman has arrived at orgasm... Then the man must close his eyes, concentrate his thoughts, press his tongue firmly against the soft palate, arch his back, tense his neck, open his nostrils wide, contract his shoulders, close his mouth and swallow his breathing. His sperm then surges upwards spontaneously. Man is capable of maintaining perfect control over his ejaculations: when he has sexual relationships with women he must not ejaculate more than two or three times out of ten connections."

Anyone who has read Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis or the Kinsey Report, or is aware of the unsatisfied sexual needs of our women — unsatisfied partly no doubt because of male selfishness, but mainly















because the men are uneducated in sexual matters and instead of studying Master Tung-hsuan have had to depend on the crude folklore of the school, the barracks or the brothel — must applaud the wisdom of these counsels. And Master Tung-hsuan's treatise is only one of the numerous works which were available in antiquity to instruct the Sons of Han in the arts of the bedchamber. Even such a strictly official dynastic history as that of the Former Han includes in its bibliography eight works devoted to the art of love. In this early period, before the Christian era, Master Jung-ch'eng stated what was to remain the religious and sexual creed of the Chinese for two thousand years: "The art of sexual relationships with women consists in remaining master of oneself so as to avoid ejaculation, in order that the sperm may rise to the brain and strengthen it." In this period the Chinese were already teaching the importance of the preliminary love play: they knew that a kiss was not a meaningless gesture but a caress which involved the whole being and ought to be reserved for the bedroom. (Perhaps this is why, when I see young couples nuzzling one another or clinging together, locked mouth to mouth, amid the petrol fumes of the city, on a railway platform or in a compartment on the Underground, I react with the same distaste as would a Chinese. Poor unhappy creatures who do not even understand what they are about, and are surprised when they find that they have made a mess not only of their own but of their partner's sexual life! *That is not true sexual freedom!*)

We must, however, beware of seeing the Chinese as shining examples of altruism in the erotic arts. No doubt their conception of the life of the flesh, which provides such a sound and satisfactory basis for the only form of happiness which counts, may be linked with a matriarchal conception of society — for otherwise how are we to explain the fact that in the coupling of *yin* and *yang* it is always the female element, the *yin*, that comes first? Or that it is always a simple young girl who reveals the secrets of sexual life to the male, to the Yellow Emperor himself? But it also has the function of maintaining domestic peace in a polygamous society and preserving the interests of the man, who lives under the perpetual threat of losing by ejaculation the substance which is precious above all others, the *yang*. Being sure that it was important for a man not to squander the male principle within him, and that — given the complementary nature of *yin* and *yang* — the fundamental unity of these elements was represented by the idea and the word *tao*, the Chinese built up a system which, while allowing them without hazard to their own life to satisfy one principal wife, a number of secondary wives and a variety



of concubines, maintained their integrity, or indeed strengthened it. In order to nourish his *yang*, a man must seek to absorb as much as he could of the *yin* principle. Thus Chang Ts'an, a minister of the Han dynasty (who was supposed to have lived to the age of 180), had learned from the bedchamber treatises how to absorb the secretions (*yin*) from women's breasts; and every educated Chinese knew that he must nourish his virility by drinking at the "fountain of jade": that is, by remaining within the woman while she was coming to orgasm and withdrawing only after this stage was reached, without









losing any of the precious fluid. The treatises prescribe that a man should proceed in the same manner with several women during a single night. But let our respectable citizens restrain their indignation at this, and let them remember that a polygamous civilisation must look on these matters in a different way from a country which is officially monogamous. (Though even in a monogamous country the occupants of the marital bed have often enough just left the arms of another partner).

The important thing, therefore, is to drink frequently, and to drink long draughts, at the "fountain of jade". (It is pleasant to think that there is an excellent Chinese restaurant in Paris known as "The Fountain of Jade": a name which provokes agreeable reflections whenever I have a meal there).

After satisfying five or six concubines in this way without losing any of his male force, and indeed increasing his store of *yin* in the process, a man might go on to perform his pious duty of impregnating the wife from whom he desired a child. The child would preferably be a son; for in the historical period the Chinese family was of patriarchal type, and only a son could celebrate the domestic cult of the ancestors. If he wanted a son the model husband would first meditate on the precept in the *Tao Te Ching* which laid it down that "the child conceived at midnight will have a long life, the child conceived before midnight will enjoy the normal span, and the child conceived after midnight will die young", and would then fertilise his wife on the first and third days after her menstrual period. If he already had an assured posterity and was prepared to be content with a daughter he would lie with his wife on the fourth or fifth day of the monthly cycle. In either case he would be dispensing the fluid which at all other times he would jealously preserve by the practice of *coitus reservatus* (*reservatus*, not *interruptus*).

We ought not to scoff at the aberrant physiology which supposed that the *yang* principle, carefully preserved in the manner just described, moved up the spinal column to the brain. It is a familiar fact that when a desire has been long contained, long held back and long preserved it builds up to tremendous force when at last it is given full vent. We ought rather to marvel that with two or three correct observations (including the analysis of the five signs indicating the woman's attainment of sexual pleasure, which agrees with that of contemporary authorities) and a good deal of faulty metaphysics and anatomy the Chinese of the pre-Buddhist period were able to develop an art of love well suited to their polygamous society. We may equally marvel that, starting from a prejudice which in one sense was















purely selfish (the desire to conserve the *yang* principle), the Chinese evolved a sexual technique of extreme altruism, requiring the man to think in the first place of the woman, the beloved enemy (who was rarely seen in sexual terms as an adversary, but was rather regarded as being different and complementary). We may marvel also at Master Tung-hsuan's recognition that the education of children begins with the meeting of the male and female principles in the mother's womb. As soon as a woman has conceived, she must submit herself to a strict discipline. She must give up all foods that heat the blood; she must renounce all forms of therapeutic treatment, including acupuncture and cauterisation; she may no longer ride in a chariot or on horseback. On the other hand she must have the great canonical texts read aloud to her at regular times. If she does all this, then "the son will be intelligent and shrewd, loyal and virtuous. This is what is known as *educating the foetus*."

Thus the original school of Taoist thought, before it degenerated into a patchwork of superstitions, techniques for achieving immortality and magic spells, was remarkable chiefly as being a gay and unconstrained form of asceticism which was able to reconcile the obligations of the man with the pleasure of the woman. "If a man performs the act once without emitting sperm he will give vigour to his vital inflow. If he performs it twice, his sight and hearing will become sharper. Three times, and all ailments will disappear. Four times, and his soul will find peace. Five times, and his circulation will improve." And so it continues: if he achieves the feat ten times, then he is "like to the immortals". This is confirmed by other texts: "Those who are able to perform the sexual act many times a day without emission of sperm will cure all their maladies and live to a great age. If the act is performed with a number of different women the benefit will be the greater. Best of all is to make love with ten or more women in the course of a single night."

When I visited an exhibition of birth control techniques in Peking in 1957 I was struck by the serious and innocent way in which a number of young girls were explaining the anatomical diagrams and demonstrating the use of various appliances, pessaries, and other means of avoiding unwanted conceptions, describing without a blush how to cut the *vas deferens* or ligature the Fallopian tubes. It was as if, in spite of the prudishness of all revolutionaries and the strait-laced attitude of so many Marxists, there still survived in China some reflection of the teachings of the Simple Young Girl. In this now monogamous society, whose high birth rate would in the longer term be a source of







weakness, the principles which the exhibition was seeking to apply in the country between the Four Seas might well bring as many benefits in the twentieth century as the counsels of the Simple Young Girl had brought two and a half thousand years earlier. The same reflection was borne in on me at the end of an official banquet when we were served with a cake reproducing the symbol of the alternation of *yin*, *yang*, and *tiao*, the inevitable and harmonious interpenetration of the male and female principles.



It would have required no great effort of imagination on my part to distinguish in these geometrical forms the curves of two bodies commingled in the "great peace" of the "flowery war".

49191



### III. A LESS SIMPLE WOMAN: THE LADY PAN















































In a poem entitled *Swimming*, written in June 1956 after he had swum across the Blue River, Mao Tse-tung evokes the Lady of the Mountain of Shamans:

And on the River to the west will rise a stone wall  
 To intercept the clouds and the rain of the Mountain of Shamans.  
 In the steep gorge a lake will be born.  
 O goddess, have no care!  
 You will marvel to see another world.

In this poem, following the literary directives of Yen-an, Chairman Mao is taking up an old theme — the Mountain of Shamans — and giving it a revolutionary slant. Some may regret that in speaking of a new dam he uses the words “clouds” and “rain” in their normal sense; but since he refers to the goddess of the Mountain, the lady who made love with the Prince in the legend, any educated Chinese



will pick up the concealed allusion at once. There is nothing unusual about this; for after all it has long been the habit of painters, writers and musicians to work over old stories handed down from the past.

Indeed in using the term *yun-yu* to refer to the artificial lake whose waters will be restrained by the new dam Mao is giving us a symbol of the restraint which is such a feature of Chinese Communist morality. I am reminded of the young Chinese who told me, as millions of others might have done, that he transformed his superfluity of sexual energy into socialist energy. He was sublimating his emotions; and similarly Chairman Mao sublimates into an artificial lake, restrained by its dam, the lack of restraint which legend attributes to the Lady of the Mountain of Shamans.

It is to be hoped that the innocence of the Taoist treatises may survive the present crisis of revolutionary puritanism; but there are certain symptoms which I find disturbing. Thus I recall that when I was in Hangchow in 1957 I visited the tombs of certain illustrious ladies of the past. These monuments were cylindrical at the base, evidently with phallic significance, and some of them were surmounted by what looked to me like a kind of pessary, yellowish in colour and highly polished. I referred to them in my book, *Le Nouveau Singe pèlerin*, commenting that it appealed to me to find a memorial of this kind erected over the remains of a courtesan; but already the Chinese authorities were talking of "sing-song girls" and concubines in the same disapproving tones that a judge in the United States might use in referring to call girls. Poor little concubines! How brief their day had been! Before leaving the town I made an opportunity to pay a last visit to the tomb of Su Hsiao-hsiao (Very Little Su), a memorial very much in the spirit of *yin-yang*. One of the uprights had been repainted, and I was able to decipher a votive inscription: "How many generations of heroes have knelt under the skirts of pomegranate!" The appropriateness of the sentiment is enhanced by the fact that the word "pomegranate" is to be taken here, I think, in the special sense which it bears in Chinese erotic terminology. In spite of the Party's fulminations against light women I liked to see in this freshly repainted inscription a pointer towards a new trend: not of course — that could hardly be! — a move towards greater licence, but at least a slight relaxation in the rigidity of the official puritanism. Perhaps, I thought, something of the older China had survived after all? Alas! I was horrified to read in *Le Monde* on 10th February 1965 a report by Robert Guillain, a reliable and well-informed observer of present-day China, referring







to my dead favourite, Very Little Su: "Young people still visit this tomb and stroke the stone, for tradition has it that those who do so are assured of long-enduring happiness. But practices of this kind are tainted, says the *Kuang-ming jih-pao* — a newspaper read by the intellectuals — and must cease. Nor can the authorities tolerate any longer the laudatory inscriptions in ancient characters which surround the tomb, like this one, for example: 'She has departed, as the peach-blossom withers or the water seeps away, but her memory will be honoured at her tomb for ten thousand years.'" In talking of a last pilgrimage, therefore, I had perhaps been nearer the truth than I realised. So even if some day I have the good fortune to revisit the Western Lake I shall no longer be able to read the panegyrics on Very Little Su? Is this handful of once voluptuous dust to be held responsible for the beauty competitions organised in 1950 by Taoist sectaries, who — not content with plumbing such depths of profligacy — went on, under the cloak of their philosophy, to hold collective orgies, ritual debauches claimed to confer long life and immortality? Not surprisingly, these proceedings attracted further censure from the *Kuang-ming jih-pao*.

Let us, therefore, pray for Very Little Su. Let us pray to the Lady of the Mountain of Shamans, beseeching her to intercede with Chairman Mao, as a man of education, as a poet, as one who fought for freedom. Perhaps she might remind him that close to the monument which has caused so much scandal there is another tomb which can properly be accorded respect, or indeed veneration — the tomb of a good woman, a young widow who refused to remarry. It takes all sorts — even in China — to make the world of the flesh: the virtuous wife and Very Little Su; women who live according to the teachings of Taoism and follow the advice of a Simple Young Girl; and others who believe in the principles of Confucianism and the precepts of the Lady Pan, who died in the year 116 of our era. This stern moralist was related to another Lady Pan celebrated for her love affairs and her misfortunes, but was also the sister of the equally famous Pan Ku, the historian of the Former Han dynasty. She was a woman of education — which in those days was unusual for a married woman of blameless reputation — and the Emperor Ho (89–105) commissioned her to complete her brother's history and to instruct the Empress. The Emperor knew what he was about; in particular he knew that the Lady Pan, a Confucian of the strictest rule, insisted on high standards of female virtue. She demanded also that girls must be taught to read at the age of eight and must go to school at fifteen, just like boys —



although in those days this was the age at which girls began their initiation into the arts of love. No doubt Master K'ung (the teacher known to the West as Confucius) had omitted to grant women the rights which he accorded to men of quality; but after all — the scandal of it! — he had visited the Princess Nan-tsu of Wei, who was well known to have an incestuous relationship with her brother. "But she spoke to me from behind a curtain," he retorted to those who reproached him with the unsuitability of such a visit. It seems, therefore, that he was not such a puritan as he is painted: he was certainly less draconic than the Lady Pan.





This Confucian prude was the author of a collection of *Precepts for Women* which were admired and imitated for many centuries, even as late as the Manchu dynasty. Here at least is a moralist who admits no departure from the strictest standards! Although she recognises — as any true Chinese must — that the relationship between man and woman reflects the harmonious concord of *yin* and *yang* and maintains the order of the cosmos and of society, the Lady Pan observes at once that the *yang* operates by virtue of activity and strength, while the *yin* operates by yielding, by the strength which comes from weakness: "Thus a woman cannot do other, and cannot do better, than cultivate a respectful demeanour, and avoid ill treatment by practising obedience. Hence it is said that 'to defer, to obey — such is the golden rule for women.' " And although the rites require, or at least permit, a man to marry several wives, "a woman cannot obey two masters... A woman, therefore, cannot leave her husband." Perhaps we need not take issue with this; but what about the pleasures of the bedroom, that inalienable element in human freedom? On this we are firmly put in our place: "A wife must endeavour to obtain the affection of her husband. This does not mean, however, that she may seek to attain this result by adroit flatteries or passionate intimacies. She must concentrate her heart, school herself to a dignified bearing, scrupulously observe the rites, respect the rules of good manners and seek to maintain herself pure." It is not for her to abandon herself to the delights of the bed: "The bond between husband and wife is a lifelong one. Dalliance in the bedroom promotes licentiousness; licentiousness leads to unseemly conversation; from unseemly conversation it is a short step to the acceptance of immorality; and this can only bring the wife to despise her husband." And the Lady Pan goes on to lay down that the woman's function — her only function — is to be "the shadow and the echo" of her husband.

The puritanism of present-day China has thus antecedents within China itself. After a period when he was suspect to the Communist regime, Master K'ung has now been rehabilitated, honour is once again paid to his cult, and Chairman Mao refers in some of his recent poems to the *Lun Yu*, the "Analects" or "Familiar Conversations"; and I suspect that the prudishness of the Lady Pan may have something to do with it. Her strait-laced precepts must not, however, be equated with the Christian anathema on the flesh. The adherents of Confucianism have never believed or taught that chastity is the same thing as virtue, that the woman most to be admired is one who submits without pleasure to the







assault of a mate in quest of pleasure or posterity. The Chinese do not place any exaggerated value on continence. According to the *Li Chi*, a collection of texts concerned with ritual, a man is bound to honour each of his concubines, no matter whether she is beautiful or ugly, young or old, until she reaches the age of fifty, and must visit each of them at least once every five days. When we remember that, according to the ritual, the sexual life of the Confucian man continued until the age of seventy (when a husband and wife gained the right to touch one another elsewhere than in bed and to keep their possessions in the same trunk), we realise that the sexual practices of Taoism must have been of great benefit to those strict Confucians who might — like an Emperor of the Chou dynasty — be faced with the task of individually honouring, every five days, no fewer than eighty-one concubines. We must not, however, make the mistake of thinking that either the doctrines of the Simple Young Girl or the precepts of the Lady Pan represent the actual pattern of behaviour in China before the arrival of Buddhism, which had little in common with either the admirably relaxed teachings of Taoism or the fastidious virtue preached by the Confucians. There were of course plenty of virtuous wives, like the heroine of an exemplary tale told by Henri Maspero in his *Vie privée sous les Han*: "Her husband, who had a mortal enemy, slept in a different room every night. The enemy threatened the wife that he would kill her father unless she revealed where her husband would be spending the following night. Caught between two conflicting duties, she indicated a particular room to the murderer; then slept in it herself and was killed in place of her husband." A very moral story, no doubt; but it might often happen, nevertheless, that those who in public practised or professed the Confucian virtues revealed themselves in bed to be skilled in the arts recommended by the Simple Young Girl. When I think of Maspero's paragon of virtue I cannot help imagining her in rather different circumstances — gracefully undoing her drawers, her smile brightened by a beauty-spot, or perhaps by more than one, while the man has just taken off his "sweat vest" and "urine slip" (to use the Chinese names of the garments). Yes: I think I am entitled to imagine this wife as being like the one whose loving attentions were celebrated in the first century of our era by the astronomer and poet Chang Heng (78-139), inventor of the seismograph, in these terms:

#### THE SONG OF UNISON

So I have been granted the unhopèd-for boon;  
I have been admitted to the joys of your women's quarters.















崇禎六年秋七月

趙士鵬畫





















My heart has longed for this new encounter;  
I am afraid, like one who fears to scald her hand.  
Innocent of talent as I am, I shall do my best  
To perform with credit the part allotted to me.  
I shall assist you with the rite, the sacrifice,  
I dream of being, for your sake, the bamboo mat  
Which screens the foot of our square bed;  
I would be, for your sake, the silken coverlet  
Which guards you from the winds and the frosts.  
I put the pillow to rights and clean the mat,  
I diffuse the aroma of the strong incense,  
With a golden bar I bolt the shutters,  
And everywhere I set up the light of lamps.  
I undress: with a handkerchief I remove my powder,  
And over the pillow I unroll our images.  
I follow the teachings of a Simple Young Girl,  
Skilfully ringing the changes on the thousand positions  
Which the ordinary husband encounters but rarely.  
T'ien-lao taught them to our Yellow Emperor,  
No pleasure shall match the pleasure of this night,  
Nor shall advancing years allow it to be forgotten.

Under the Han dynasty, however, a variety of strange practices came into favour. It was as if for the undistinguished rulers of those days political power was merely a means of indulging strange and squalid deviations. Incest, bestiality and sadism flourished, and lecherers and perverts multiplied. There was, for example, a prince who compelled women to go down on all fours, naked, and allow themselves to be mounted by he-goats. There was the story of Chao-hsin, the concubine for whom a prince sacrificed (in the most literal sense) other wives whom he also loved. After falsely reporting to the prince that one of the other wives had shown herself naked to a painter who was doing her portrait, Chao-shin accused her rival of adultery; whereupon the prince caused her to be whipped (which was in accordance with the accepted practice of the day) and burned with red-hot needles (which was not such an accepted practice). When the poor wretch threw herself into a well Chao-shin caused her to be pulled out, and then killed her with her own hand by impaling her through the vagina. Another rival was dealt with by having her eyes torn out, her thighs slashed with a knife, and molten lead poured into her mouth. Sometimes, no doubt, the Emperors took action against the excesses committed by their vassals: at any rate Chao-shin was executed and her prince disgraced.



Another group who suffered hardship under the Han dynasty were the Chinese princesses who were married off for reasons of state to "barbarians". One of these was the young Hsi-kun, who was handed over to an aged ruler of the Wu-sun. She knew nothing of their language, and her husband knew no Chinese. She gave vent to her unhappiness in verse, and touched the Emperor's heart. The aged king, however, determined to hand her over to his grandson, and Hsi-kun had to submit to this new slavery:

#### SONG OF A MELANCHOLY AUTUMN

My family have given me in marriage,  
Sending me to the end of the world.  
They have handed me over to a stranger,  
To a distant barbarian king.  
The round tent is my palace,  
With walls constructed of felt.  
Dried meat is all I have to eat,  
Koumiss my only drink.  
All day I dream of my own country;  
My heart is bruised and sore.  
Would I were the yellow swan  
Which flies back there!\*\*

In the words of a poet of the time:

The man thinks only of his latest bride,  
The woman of him who chose her first.

If we are to believe the historians, this was the case with Cho Wen-chun, wife of the famous poet of the Han period, Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju. It is a remarkable story, recently retold by M. Hervouet in his book, *Un Poète de cour sous les Han, Sseu-ma Siang-jou*. Cho Wang-sun was a rich merchant, the owner of eight hundred slaves, who, being desirous of ingratiating himself with the Prefect, invited this high official to dinner. Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju was staying with the Prefect and accompanied him to the merchant's house. During the banquet, at which the wine flowed freely, the Prefect invited the poet to play the lute. "Now Cho Wang-sun had a daughter named Wen-chun, recently widowed, who was fond of music. And as he poured his heart out on the lute Hsiang-ju, while pretending to do honour to the

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\*\* The verses followed by two asterisks are taken from the *Anthologie de la poésie chinoise* (ed. Paul Demiéville), Paris, Gallimard, 1962; 2nd edition, 1969.







Prefect, was in reality seeking to win the young woman's heart. On his arrival in Lin-ch'ung with an escort of horsemen round his chariot his easy manner and distinguished bearing had been magnificent to see, and as he drank at the Cho family's banquet and played the flute Wen-chun, who was watching him secretly from the door, rejoiced in her heart and loved him." The *Shih ching tsa chi* gives us the following portrait of the heroine: "Wen-chun was very beautiful. Her magnificent eyebrows had the aspect of a mountain glimpsed far away on the horizon. The lines of her face had the unchanging beauty of the hibiscus. Her skin was soft and smooth as an ointment." It is an entirely conventional description; this other portrait, also dating from the Han period, would have served equally well: "Her fingers are like shoots of sow-thistle, her skin is like congealed rouge, her neck is like a cockchafer grub, her teeth are like melon seeds, her forehead like a cicada's head, her eyebrows like the feelers of silkworms; . . . her black hair is like a cloud, without a single false curl; . . . her forehead is white; . . . how brilliant are her teeth amid so many artful smiles!" Ssu-ma Ch'ien maintains, however, that, like a well trained Chinese woman accustomed to her position of inferiority, Wen-chun thought that "she could hope for nothing". The poems which tradition says were sung by Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju must have served to reassure her:

The phoenix, the phoenix is flying off to his home,  
 Wandering between the Four Seas in quest of a wife.  
 He has not found one, and knows not where to turn...  
 What makes him, this evening, go up into the great hall?  
 - Because in it there is a fair and virtuous lady.  
 The hall is near, but distant the lady: "O the poison in my entrails!"  
 How then do two mandarin ducks bring their necks together?

The response comes in a second song:

The she-phoenix, the she-phoenix finds him on her perch.  
 Let her yield to his embrace and become his mate for ever.  
 In love and the union of bodies their hearts are singing in harmony.  
 At dead of night she comes to him; but who will know?  
 The two birds, flying as one, soar into the blue of the sky...  
 When my dream is ended the heart within me is sad, so sad!

The same night Wen-chun flees without waiting to seek counsel of her father, although a widow with any self-respect never remarried, even *per usum*. Is her action the result of calculation or a sudden



impulse? At any rate it is a classic case of the *coup de foudre*, love at first sight, which became one of the favourite themes of amorous literature in China. Usually it is the heroine who bears the blame, as in this *Lament for White Hair*, which was wrongly attributed to Cho Wen-chun:

My hair is white as the mountain snow,  
White as the moon between the clouds.  
I have found that your heart is not mine alone,  
And so I have come; for we must part.  
Today is a meeting, an occasion for drinking;  
But tomorrow, at dawn, we shall walk with heavy feet  
On the embankment by the canal,  
Where the waters go their separate ways to east and west.



Sad, sad I am, sad for eternity.  
Surely the bride should not expect tears?  
She wants a husband with faithful heart  
Who will not abandon her white hair.  
Why do the bamboos quiver so?  
How the fish twitches its tail!  
But a man must lead an ordered life:  
Why have you squandered your money?

At least one champion — Yao Tsi-heng, who lived in an age of puritanism — has been found to plead the lovers' cause: "I cannot understand why Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, with all his talents and his fine appearance on horseback, did not ask the Prefect to be his intermediary in seeking Wen-chun's hand





in marriage. If he had, Wen-chun would not have had to languish for love of him. But instead of that he seduced her with his lute and induced her to disobey her father's orders. Surely it need not have happened this way; for Hsiang-ju and Wen-chun were the most magnificent couple known to history. With the Prefect as intermediary the matter would have been arranged to everyone's advantage. Even so it would have been a kind of bargain, as usually happens with women: it would not have been a case of two lovers with eyes shining in token of mutual bliss. As things turned out he seduced her and she ran away from home; and clearly this way of proceeding is very different from a union of interests. But although this attitude cannot be regarded as orthodox I cannot see that it should be condemned as licentious."



Old Cho was able to satisfy his own miserly instincts and the requirements of morality at the same time by deciding that his worthless daughter should not receive a single cash of his money. Hsiang-ju then sold his few possessions, and the lovers returned to Lin-ch'iung, where they bought a drink-shop — a humble trade in those days and a humiliating one for people in their position. Was it not shameful for the court poet to be seen washing dishes in the open marketplace? Old Cho was so ashamed to see his daughter serving drinks in a public bar that he dared not put his nose outside his own door. Finally, through the good offices of her brother and some of the leading citizens of the town, Wen-chun received her share of the family fortune — a hundred slaves, a million cash, and all the clothes, blankets and precious objects which she possessed at the time of her marriage. The two lovers lived long and happily together, in an "agreeable idleness". Some censorious critics have alleged that as a















result of the unrestrained pleasures he enjoyed with his mistress Hsiang-ju contracted a venereal disease. So far as we can judge from the clinical evidence available to us, however, his complaint was probably diabetes, which would of course be aggravated by heavy eating and drinking. Nevertheless he survived into his sixties.

Whether or not he was the author of the erotic poem, *Mad for the Love of a Beautiful Woman* (which M. Hervouet considers apocryphal), what we know of the life of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju, the Confucian poet, is enough to show that in the Han period it was possible to move easily from the practice of Confucianism in ordinary social life to the freedom of Taoism, and indeed to a freedom entirely without restrictions, in sexual and amorous relationships.





#### IV. A COMPLEX FEMALE PERSONALITY: WU TSE-T'EN

Whereas Confucianism and Taoism were able to co-exist in China, sharing the allegiance of men's senses and minds — often, indeed, the senses and mind of the same man — it was very different with Buddhism. This foreign religion, brought into China about the beginning of the Christian era, rose to such overmastering temporal power that one of the T'ang Emperors was compelled in the year 845 to halt its advance by secularising the monks and nuns who were taking advantage of their special status and ruining the Empire.





In so far as it broke with Hinduism, ran counter to the caste system and asserted that women were not inferior to men, the new religion was in line with Taoist speculative thought. (The Buddha himself thought little of women, and indeed is said to have declared that their admission to his religion would hasten its decline. His disciples, however, proclaimed women to be equal to men). This is no doubt one reason why Chinese women were so ready to become converts: if only for purely selfish reasons, Chinese men had a natural leaning towards Confucianism. Accordingly many women became nuns — perhaps because they wanted to escape an arranged marriage or because their parents, unthinkingly enough, had vowed them to the service of the Buddha. Whole villages — men, women and babes in arms — took to the monastic life in order to escape the exactions of the tax-collector. Clearly voca-



tions of this kind might sometimes be insufficient to sustain the highest standards of life. Hence the bad reputation enjoyed by monks and nuns, who were commonly depicted in stories and novels as a disorderly and licentious brood. As evidence of this we may quote this fragment of an essay attributed to the poet Po Chu-i's brother, the *Ta lo fu* or "Treatise on the Supreme Joy", criticising monastic manners in the T'ang period:

"Although the nuns dare not speak of it, at the bottom of their hearts they are ready to succumb. As lovers they take nobles or illustrious men of letters who have renounced the world and gone in for the religious life, or sturdy foreign monks with shaven heads and potent penises who, though barbarian in appearance, nevertheless speak Chinese. When they are in company with these lovers the nuns forget the law of the Buddha and play absent-mindedly with their rosaries."

We may also cite *The Ocean of Turpitude of the Monks and Nuns*, which dates from the Ming period; but this work is of less interest to us for its stories of dissolute behaviour in the monastic houses than for its verbatim reproduction of a text of Taoist inspiration on the "nine positions".

Another variant of the Great Vehicle, Tantrism, conquered China after the Mongol invasions. Since "Tantrism" has about as much specific meaning as some of our Western terms like idealism and dialectic, it may be helpful to note at this point that I use it to mean a religious discipline which teaches that sexual union is the surest means of obtaining salvation, in contrast to the more orthodox sects which seek it in a renunciation of the blandishments of the flesh and of all concupiscence. Obsessed by the complementary nature of the male and female principles, and seeing the fullest expression of this in the hermaphrodite — for them an image of quasi-divine perfection — the adepts of Tantrism practised a sexual technique similar to that of the Taoists, claiming that their use of *coitus reservatus* directed all the strength and virtue of their semen up to the brain.

We need not be surprised, therefore, that the Chinese readily accepted theories of this kind with which they were already familiar, and quickly took to the collective orgies for which Taoism already provided a precedent. Scholars have still not made up their minds whether Tantrism was a purely Indian creation or a development of Indian Buddhism under the influence of Taoism. M. Filliozat's book *Taoïsme et Yoga*, published in 1949, noted that legends are still current in the Tamil country about the wise men who went to China and brought back certain philosophical ideas — so that, for example, the Tamils















classify minerals as male and female, in accordance with the Chinese idea of *yin-yang*. We must therefore suppose that, just as Chinese pilgrims went as far as India and brought back sacred texts and rules for the conduct of life, so there were Indians who brought back certain truths from China. And even if it were a pure coincidence, the fact remains that Tantrism and Taoism have similar views on both the means and the final end of sexual pleasure.

I recall the delight with which I visited, in the summer of 1957, the Buddhist sanctuary of Tun-huang, on the old Silk Road. Apart from the many caves dating from the T'ang and Sung periods, I was particularly interested by Cave 465, the paintings in which were done in the latter part of the thirteenth century or the first half of the fourteenth, under the Mongol dynasty of the Yuan. This is the only cave at Tun-huang containing a series of Tantric paintings. The dominant theme is an erotic *pas de deux*, symbolising the mystical and fruitful union of male and female, which occupies the centre of a cosmic wheel illustrating the whole of creation. The multiple arms of the sublime lovers enable them to draw their bows during the moment of sexual union, while using their other arms to achieve their complicated embraces. The drawing and disposition of the masses of the large couple painted on the wall to the left of the entrance seemed to me to be particularly effective; but I am still puzzled to know what ballerina of our day would be able to curl her left leg round her partner's right thigh while at the same time contriving to make love. Groups of this kind are powerfully erotic, and consequently innocent of all obscenity, as is the erotic art of Taoism. Accordingly I was not unduly surprised to learn from Van Gulik's book on *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, a few years later, that under the Ming dynasty, after the Chinese restoration, Tantric images of this kind were used to instruct princes and princesses in the refinements and variations of the conjugal art: "Thus we find here the Tantric statues used for exactly the same purpose as the illustrations of the old handbooks of sex, namely for instruction in the methods of sexual intercourse."

Thus in Chinese Buddhism the most original element of religious eroticism, Tantrism, is not really an innovation. However much it may be decried, particularly by those who despise carnal love, it is much less open to criticism on this account than some more orthodox forms. By a curious dialectical effect Buddhism, a religion founded on compassion, gave rise in China, particularly among the noble and princely families, to a degree of cruelty which seems its very negation. Jacques Gernet cites some





examples of this in his work on the economic aspects of Buddhism. The Emperor Kao Wei, the last of the Ch'i dynasty (565-577), for example, built for one of his concubines, Hu, the Ta-ts'u ssu or Monastery of the Great Compassion — a compassion for which "countless were the men and cattle to perish". The Empress Wu Tse-t'ien is a striking exemplification of this mingling of Buddhist bigotry and implacable cruelty, with an added seasoning of licentiousness.

The youthful Wu entered the seraglio of the powerful Li Shih-min in 638, at the age of only fourteen. She was then merely one of the three thousand beauties whom he had brought together for his pleasure, and of no great social distinction, being the daughter of a merchant, Che-huo, who had done the Emperor some service. Nevertheless she was admitted to the honours of the Imperial couch, and thereupon conceived a relentless ambition. Immediately the Emperor's illness suggested to her mind that he







might have to yield up his throne to a successor she turned her wiles on the heir, as we have already seen, and became the recipient of the princely "dew". She also succeeded in conceiving a child by him — now the Emperor Kao-tsung — in the very convent to which the proprieties had compelled her to retire, along with the other wives of the late Emperor (649). Thereafter she proceeded, by dint of intrigue, calumny and murder, as well as much dexterity and dissimulation, to eliminate all those, both men and women, who stood between her and the power she sought. She did not shrink from killing one of her own children in order that the murder might be attributed to the Empress, and was successful in securing the disgrace not only of the Empress but of a wife of the second rank whose charms and influence were a threat to her position. Her two innocent victims, guilty only of having shared the Emperor's couch, spent several years in a dungeon and were then tortured to death: their hands and feet were cut off, the stumps were tied behind their backs, and they were immersed in a vat of vinegar, in which they lingered for several days. Although an incompetent ruler, Kao-tsung was able to appreciate Wu's intelligence and political sense; and he made her Empress in 655, and joint ruler, along with himself, for the last few years of his reign until his death in 683.

Having been appointed Regent, she outraged all the proprieties and granted herself the title of Emperor. Her Buddhist piety soon involved her with Hsieh Huai-i, "a lascivious bonze, outstandingly skilful in the arts of the flesh". After being recommended to Wu Tse-t'ien by a princess who had benefited from his skill, the bonze entered the usurping Empress's service and her bed. In his capacity as the Imperial paramour he was charged with the task of erecting a five-storey temple embellished with a statue 100 feet high. He was also commissioned to build the Ming-t'ang, the Sacred Palace. When this palace was completed the bonze received the rank of "Grand General Commanding the Majestic Guard of the Left" and the title of Duke of the Principality of Liang. Although the Empress was now of advanced years, we learn from the *Hsin T'ang Shu* that "she applied her paints and cosmetics with such consummate skill that the courtiers perceived no signs of her physical decline." And indeed we know that at this period the women of the wealthier classes went in for very elaborate make-up. Their lips were reddened with pomade; their eyebrows were cunningly arranged in tufts and painted cobalt blue; beauty-spots and patches of rouge were applied to their cheeks; and there might also be beauty-spots on their brows and even on their chins — and not only for the purpose of concealing the marks









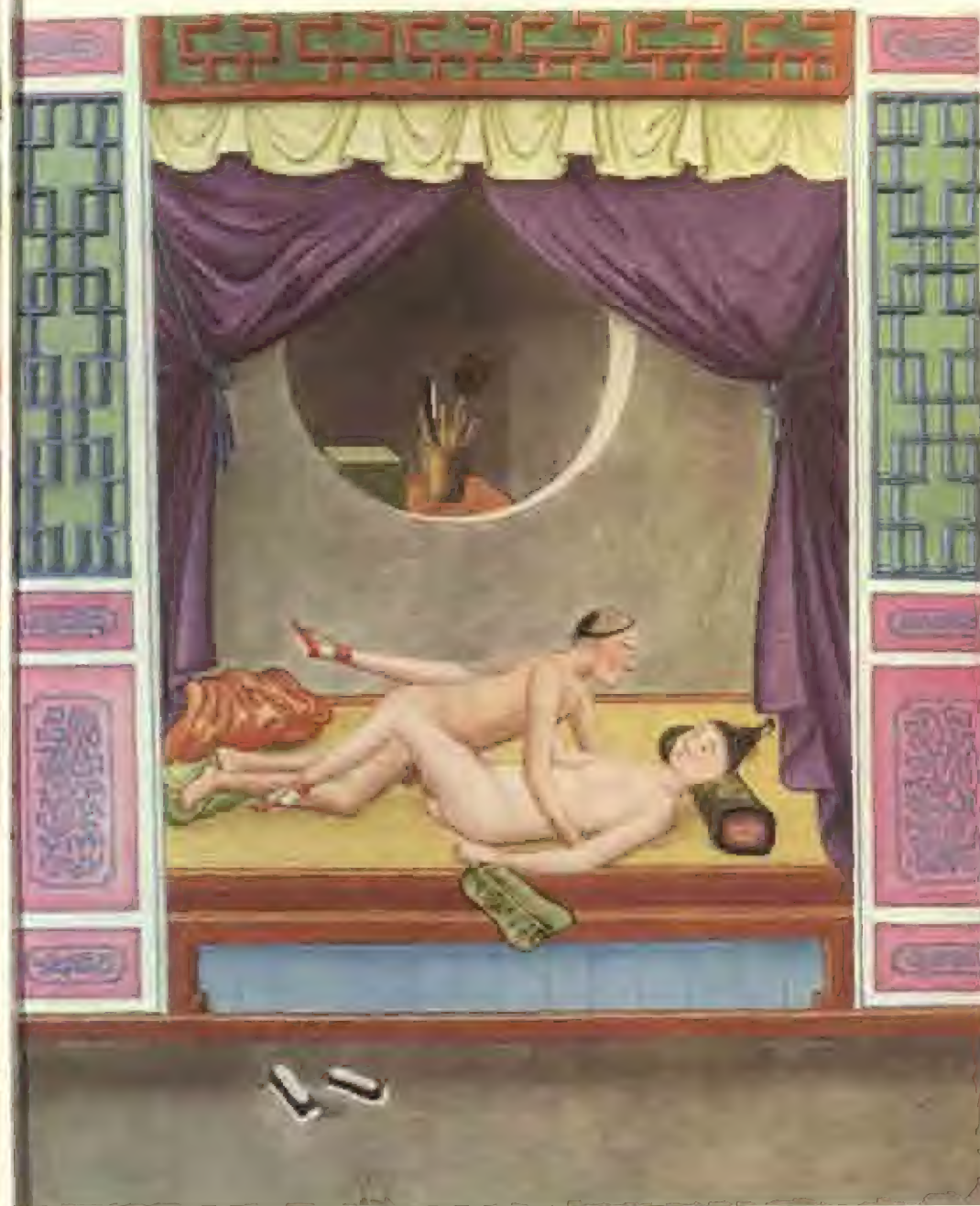






















of the burns with which jealous wives often sought to disfigure concubines who seemed to be enjoying too much of their husband's favour. In addition some women had what was known as a "mark of beauty" on their forehead — a yellow patch in the shape of a crescent moon. Wu Tse-t'ien could no doubt palliate the ravages of time by devices such as these; but the *Hsin T'ang Shu* does not tell us how she contrived to conceal from her lovers the condition of her bosom — for at that period it was the fashion to wear a décolleté which was both wide open and plunging — or how she was able to outshine the young beauties of the day who satisfied the demands of fashion by dancing with bare breasts. We do know, however, that when she acquired two new teeth at a very advanced age (a phenomenon which is commoner than is generally supposed) the Buddhist monks had little trouble in persuading her that this was a sign of eternal youth.

Between one lover and another she would order princes, mandarins or ministers who had displeased her to have their throats cut. "The gates of the prisons were red with blood. Families were no longer able to perpetuate themselves." When she was 72 years old she wearied of the infidelities of Hsieh Huai-i (who referred to her as the "grandmother") and took in his place the court doctor, Ch'en Nan-kiu. When the monk revenged himself by setting fire to the Ming-t'ang, the palace which he had himself built, the Empress had him assassinated. She then became infatuated with two young gallants, the Chang brothers, who were known as Master Five and Master Six. History does not relate whether she made them free of her almost octogenarian body in the Hall of Mirrors which she had built for her dalliance with the Emperor Kao-tsung. It seems likely that she did, for a poem of the period refers to Master Six "enjoying many a secret sport in the Hall of Mirrors".

When she was 81 a palace revolution relegated her to confinement under guard, and her two lovers were killed. In the same year (705) she died a natural death, after granting herself the posthumous title of "Great and Saintly One, Empress Regnant in accordance with the Will of Heaven". She was, however, accorded only the lesser style of "Great and Saintly Empress, as Heaven wills".

Equally well known is the story of a concubine who lived not long after Wu Tse-t'ien — Yang Kuei-fei. Near Hsi An-fu, among some of the great memorials of Chinese civilisation — the city of the Han Emperors, the tomb of Ch'in-shih-huang-ti — the visitor must not fail to see the Hua sh'ing ch'e, the pleasure palace of the T'ang rulers. He will find some rather muddy warm springs, in which various





water plants contrive to flourish, and will then be struck all the more by the limpidity of the water in the "bathing pool shaped like a peony flower". This pool must surely summon up the image of the fair Yang Kuei-fei, who according to the legend was particularly fond of this palace. Her story has been told in a Chinese play and a Japanese film; but even during her lifetime her beauty was celebrated



by the poets of the day. The most famous of all the poems devoted to her was the "Song of Eternal Regret" (or "Song of Eternal Remorse") by Po Chu-i (772-846).

#### SONG OF ETERNAL REGRET

The Emperor of the Han, adept in lewdness, dreamed of a beauty that should destroy a throne;



But reigned for years without discovering it.  
 In the family of Yang was a maiden, in the flower of ripening youth;  
 Brought up in the women's quarters, she was known to none,  
 Having received Heaven's gift of beauty, she could not remain immured;  
 And one day she was called to the presence of the ruler.  
 When, stealing a glance, she smiled, so many charms were revealed  
 That in the six harems, despite all paint and powder, none could compare with her.  
 On a chilly spring day she was admitted to the honour of the bath, in the Pool of  
 the Brightness of Flowers,  
 Whose warm caressing spring polished the smooth whiteness of her body.  
 The maids raised her up, delicate and swooning with languor;  
 And it was then she first enjoyed the favours of the prince.  
 Her hair about her in a cloud, her face in blossom, she wore the gold aigrette which  
 trembles on the head of queens;  
 Under the warm curtain patterned with water-lilies she spent nights of love in spring;  
 Nights all too brief, alas! with the sun so quick to rise.  
 The prince now neglected his morning audience,  
 Submissive to his pleasures, serving him at feasts, she had neither rest nor respite;  
 Sharing in spring the sports of spring, each night companion of his nights.  
 In the recesses of the harem were three thousand beauties;  
 Three thousand, but now the august lover loved only one.  
 Having adorned herself in the golden chamber, she devoted her graces to the tender  
 cares of the night;  
 In the pavilion of jade, after the feast, the drunkenness of wine was well matched  
 to the ardour of love.\*\*

What is the story behind this poem? The heroine was the daughter of an officer who had occupied an important post in the Ministry of War and had been ennobled by a whim of Juei-tsung, one of the sons of the "Emperor" Wu Tse-t'ien. Juei-tsung was the father of a son who later became the illustrious Emperor Hsuan-tsung or Ming-huang. Ming-huang had been on the throne for eight years when the Lady Yang was born in 720. At the age of fifteen she became one of the concubines of the Emperor's eighteenth son, Prince Shou. It is said that her particular charm lay in her plumpness, a quality fairly rare among Chinese women. For the sake of Hsuan-tsung's honour, however, the Chinese historians maintain that during a period of three years this consummate beauty never caught the eye nor occupied the thoughts of Shou. Finally, in 738, the Lady Yang was honoured by the Emperor's choice, and ten years later was granted the rank of Kuei-fei, "Precious Imperial Wife", and the title of T'ai-chen-kung-chu, "Princess of the Supreme Truth". Thereafter, for eighteen years, the Kuei-fei remained absolute mistress of the senses, the mind and the heart of her master.





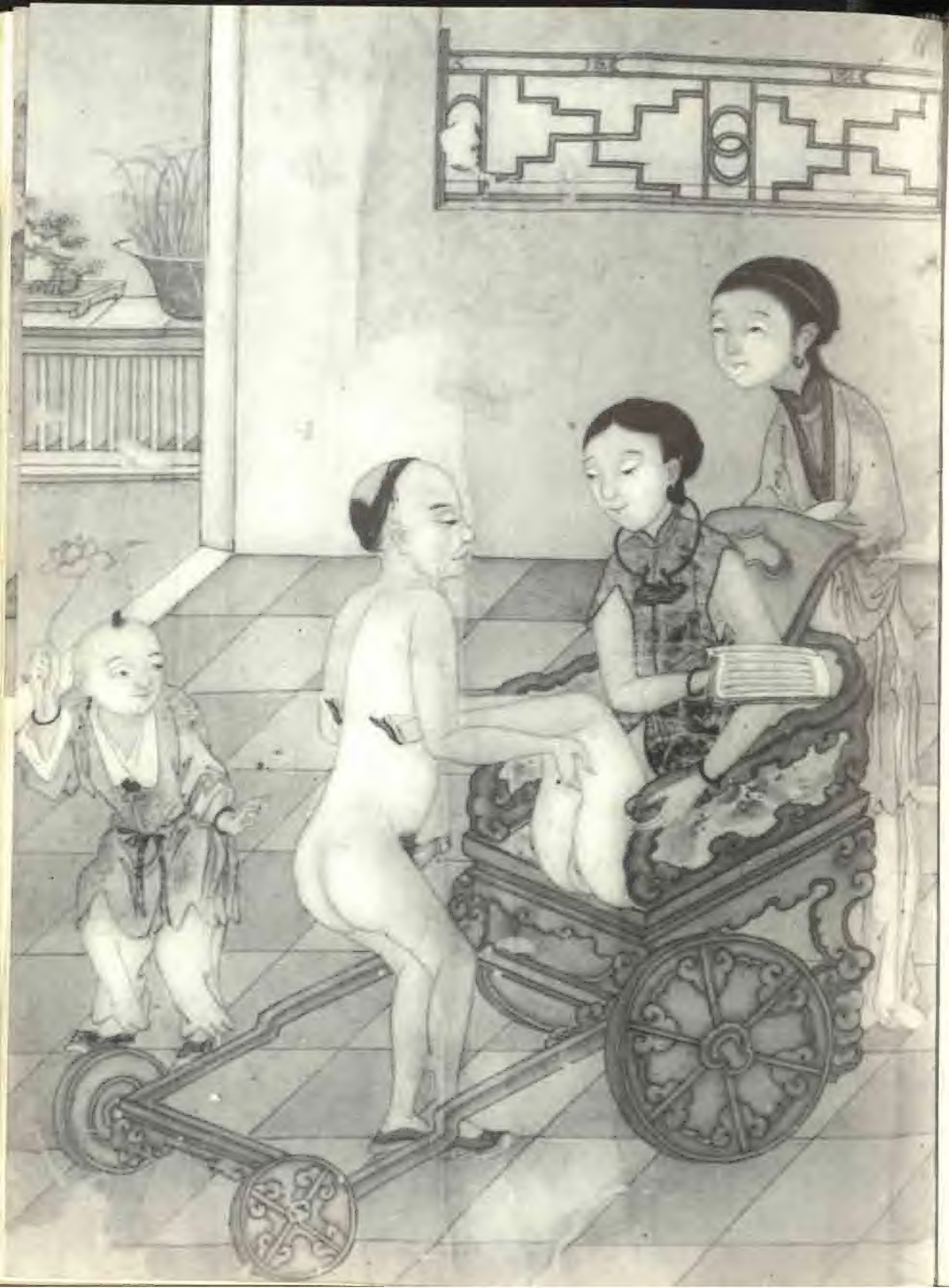














She took advantage of her position to provide for her family. Three of her sisters who were concubines were ennobled; and her famous cousin Yang Kuo-chung — rake, drunkard and gambler though he was — rose by his fair relative's influence to the highest posts in the Empire. Po Chu-i's conclusion from this is interesting:

Her sisters, her brothers were all provided for,  
Alas! Her house achieved such glorious lustre  
That, throughout the Empire, parents thought more  
Of the birth of a daughter than the cradle of a son.\*\*

The successful careers of these concubines must indeed have disturbed the accepted standards if they brought parents, in a country devoted to the cult of ancestors, to the stage of wishing for the birth of a daughter! For every girl now dreamed of the day when the "price of the body" would be paid for her and she would be brought to the Emperor, naked under the ritual covering. (No doubt there may sometimes have been another reason for preferring a daughter to a son — the fear that a son might be taken as a soldier. We see this in a few lines from a poem by Tu Fu:

I conceive that to have a son is a calamity,  
While to have a daughter is a benediction.  
A daughter can be married off to a neighbour,  
But a son is killed and buried in the steppe.  
See how, on the banks of the Kokonor,  
Those whitened bones have lain, with none to care).

As if seeking to obliterate the memory of the cruelties which had marked his childhood, during the reign of Wu Tse-t'ien, the Emperor Ming-huang had made his capital a centre of the arts which offered ready hospitality to poets, painters and musicians. Yang Kuei-fei and her august lover themselves composed verses.

In the Palace of the Black Horse, towering into the blue clouds,  
Celestial harmonies were heard, blown hither and thither by the wind:  
Languorous songs and slow pavaues, to the long notes of zither and flute.  
All day long the Sovereign gazed upon her, never tiring...\*\*

An Empire ruled by a man who enjoyed such bliss as to neglect his audiences was in no condition to resist the rising of 755-6, when An Lu-shan pressed through the ill-defended passes, marched on the capital and took it by storm. The Imperial lovers had fled; but when they and their train reached the





village of Ma Wei the army called for the death of the whole Yang family, whom it blamed for the misfortunes that had overtaken the Empire. Without waiting for the Emperor's agreement, the soldiers beheaded Yang Kuo-chung and called for the favourite's head as well. Hsuan-tung complied:

Setting out from Yu-yang, the war drums, making the ground tremble at their approach,  
 Spread panic in the midst of the tune "Rainbow Skirt and Feather Jacket",  
 Over the ramparts of the City of Nine Gates were to come days of ashes and smoke.  
 With a thousand chariots and ten thousand horsemen, the court set out for the south-west.  
 The Imperial standard swayed to and fro, now hastening forward, now at a halt,  
 And had gone a bare hundred furlongs from the capital  
 When the Six Legions refused to advance. Alas! None could prevail on them.  
 The fair one, resigned to her fate, perished amid the horses.  
 The delicately wrought jewels from her hair strewed the ground, with none to gather them,  
 With her kingfisher feathers, her gold bird, her pins of jade.  
 The Emperor veiled his face, powerless to aid her,  
 Then turned to gaze on her, mingling tears with blood.\*\*





Yang Kuei-fei was only thirty-six when she met her death. After the defeat of the rebellion in 756 the Emperor returned to the capital and abdicated in favour of his son Su-tsung; but legend has it that he never forgot the unfortunate Yang.

In the Harem of the Perfume of Pepper the eunuchs and tiring women are beginning  
to grow old.  
When evening comes and the fireflies gleam the Emperor is sad in his palace:  
His lonely lamp burns out, and still he cannot sleep.  
The slow strokes of the bell and the drum mark the passing of the endless night.  
Then the trembling glow of the Starry River grows pale in the sky as dawn approaches.  
The tiles painted with mating birds are cold, hanging with heavy fronds of frost;  
The coverlet with its pairs of kingfishers has no warmth: with whom can he share it?  
More than a year has passed since an infinite abyss came between him and his loved  
one,  
And never has her soul visited him in his dreams.\*\*





Pilgrims were already travelling to Ma Wei to honour all that remained to recall Yang Kuei-fei — one of her stockings. When visiting the Hua ch'ing ch'e in 1957 I allowed myself the sentimental gesture of gathering a few of the flowers of the silk tree (*Albizia julibrissin*) with which the ground round the bathing pool was strewn. They had a delicacy of form and colour and a subtle perfume which seemed to me worthy of the fairest, the happiest and the most unhappy of women.

Thus in spite of Buddhism the arts of the bedchamber flourished under the T'ang, so closely bound up with religion that Dr Wu-shan Sheng was able to use this text as the epigraph of his essay on Chinese erotology: "He who has attained supreme saintliness may with impunity indulge in incest with his mother, his sister or daughter, or even with the mother of a buddha."















## V. EROTICISM AND THE ARTS

A good example of the interplay between Chinese eroticism and the imported religion, Buddhism, is provided by the novel entitled *Jou p'u-tuan*, "The Prayer Mat of Flesh". (*Jou* is "flesh", *p'u* "reed"; *p'u-tuan* is a cushion of reeds or straw, of the type used by Buddhist monks when praying or meditating). In a first chapter full of Buddhist moralising we find a dissolute scholar, Mr Wei, listening to the remonstrances of an ascetic. *He* is only listening with one ear; but for the reader it is something of an ordeal. We have barely time to recover from this flood of pious sentiments when we find ourselves plunged into all the refinements of Taoism, as the ingenious Mr Wei, using the same kind of colourful imagery as had been employed at an earlier period by the Simple Young Girl, puts his prudish wife, daughter of a Taoist as uncompromising as his name, Iron Gate, through a rapid course of instruction. Picture No. 1 shows the butterfly flitting about in quest of the perfume of the flowers, No. 3 the bird returning from its wanderings to its nest in the undergrowth, No. 4 the hungry charger galloping back to its manger. The author, carefully calculating his effects, maintaining our attention and indeed some degree of tension, does not take us all the way to No. 32; but we know that Wei Yang-sheng will have much to be forgiven, for we are told that he "also used boys". Then no sooner has his wife's training been completed than the graceless man of the world tires of her company. By way of diversion, therefore, he decides to go off to the competition, the great competition which is held in the city; and he accordingly sets off, accompanied by the good wishes of his wife and father in law.



At the inn, of course, he inevitably falls in with one of those countless good-natured bandits who play such a large part in the *Shuei Hu* and are so popular in China. Emulating a well known slave in the K'un-lun mountains who was unrivalled for his skill in abducting beautiful girls of noble birth from their fathers' palaces at night, Sai K'un-lun enters the unpaid service of this scholar, who is evidently as infatuated with women as others are with God, and undertakes to find him some appetising morsels of flesh.

In the following fifteen chapters the reader learns all he needs to know about the arts of dalliance, including all the variations and embellishments, designed either for two partners, for three, or even for











five. All this is expounded in a tone reminiscent of the recipes in an old-fashioned cookery book or the instructions in an army training manual: "It is desired to take out a trench 20 feet long, 5 feet deep and 3 feet across at the top. The work consists of the excavation of the necessary soil and the construction of an embankment with the excavated soil. The excavated soil will be deposited on either side of the trench..." Wei Yang-sheng adds an appendix to the standard manual covering what is called the "union of three units (parallel methods, without disturbance)": "When he has lain for one night with each of the three, all four lie together, after which they resume the alternation for three nights." Meanwhile the plot develops vigorously and single-mindedly, until in the nineteenth chapter Mr Wei finds himself in a brothel where his partner turns out to be the wife whom he had unwittingly trained for this part. Wei Yang-sheng's first victim, the honest K'uan, whom neither his probity nor his strong-arm man had saved from cuckoldry, had taken his revenge by seducing the daughter of Iron Gatei getting her with child and then selling her to a procuress. The unfortunate Wei, who has handled no more than perhaps half a dozen women in the course of three years, is now punished by finding his own wife exposed to the assault of thousands of men. No sooner has she realised who her client is than she hangs herself. No sooner has he recognised her dead body than he goes off to be hanged — or to be saved — in a last chapter which is the counterpart of the first: a scene in which Wei Yang-sheng, the





honest K'uan and Sai K'un-lun, their heads shaved bare, make public confession to the monk. In this work we are offered two hundred pages of detailed erotic instruction: the pillow, for example, must be laid under your loins, madam, just *so*, *this* way, certainly not *that* way. There are at least three good reasons for this; the first is so-and-so; the second — take *very* careful note, madam — is such-and-such; and then the third, which you must of course bear in mind too — And so it goes on, giving an exact account of the performance of the participants, the emissions of *yang* and the secretions of *yin*. This is followed by fifteen pages of compassionate Buddhist teaching: "It can be seen, therefore, that there is no man in the world who cannot become a buddha."

It cannot be claimed that this novel is a masterpiece. The other libertine novels of China, like the *Chin-p'ing-mei* and its sequel the *Ko-lien hua-ying* ("Shadows of Flowers through a Blind"), give the reader a fuller and livelier picture of Chinese society, in which the amorous exploits of the highly placed heroes occupy their proper place among human preoccupations but do not make up the whole of life. Their complex pattern of mercenary calculation, palace intrigue, jobbery, virtue, charlatanism, torture, integrity, slander and fidelity builds up a varied, attractive, temperate and complete universe in which the scenes in the women's quarters, the courtesans, the eunuchs and their intrigues are brought in only to provide a certain savour or spice. The *Jou p'u-tuan* is very different from this. Almost the



whole action takes place in bed, in a few closed rooms — closed in the sense that the life led there is the life of a *maison close*, and also in that the characters have opted out of all social obligations and financial care: we are in the castle of *Francion* or de Sade's novels, devoted solely to the purposes of sex. There is plenty of fornication in the *Chin-p'ing-mei*, heaven (or rather the goddess Kuan-yin) knows, but the rich husband of six wives is also concerned to increase his fortune by trade and become a mandarin so that he can turn his influence to financial account.

Behaviour of this kind was of course contrary to the provisions of the penal code designed to protect citizens against the abuse of authority. Thus the penal code of the Yuan dynasty laid down a penalty of seventy-seven strokes of the rod, together with dismissal from office, for a mandarin who took advantage of his position to give in marriage the first wife of one of the citizens of his district. If he carried his misdemeanours so far as to seduce the wife of a citizen he was liable to receive seventy-seven strokes and to be reduced two grades in the hierarchy. An unsuccessful attempt at seduction was punished with fifty-seven strokes and transfer to another district. For the crime of rape the penalty was exclusion from office for life, together with a hundred and seven strokes of the rod. So, at least, the law provided; but the practice was very different, and the abuse of authority to achieve sexual ends was as commonly found in China as in some other countries. The *Chin-p'ing-mei* demonstrates, and many other works confirm, that officials abused their position for immoral purposes. Those who followed the tenets of Confucianism liked to maintain that the law must be applied with inflexible rigour — except to the privileged few, among whom they included themselves. As M. Etienne Balazs says in his translation of the legal treatise, the *Suei-shu*, "The mitigating circumstances flow from the special status of the offender and in practice secure his immunity. High and middle-grade officials are also entitled to an *automatic reduction* in the penalties laid down in the Penal Code, and all officials are entitled to *commutation* of the penalty on payment of an appropriate sum." It is not surprising, therefore, that the "realistic" works of literature should so often depict mandarins, officially responsible for protecting the interests of the family, who spend most of their time disrupting family life.

When we read these Chinese novels of manners we realise that there was as much difference between the theories expounded by the Simple Young Girl to the Yellow Emperor and the sexual practices of the Chinese as between the Christian injunction to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh only within the







marriage bond and the lives led by ordinary mortals in the countries of the West: we need think only of Casanova, who was a good Catholic as well as an accomplished libertine.

We have noted that Chinese morality imposes a duty on the husband to give equal attention to all his wives and concubines; and it is interesting in this connection to consider the case of the wretched Hsi-men, who died of an overdose of aphrodisiac pills. He had long ceased to pay regular visits to each of his five earlier wives, only the sixth having retained her power over him. Haunted by the idea that he might soon run short of aphrodisiacs, he pursued his pleasures with all the frenzy of a man who feels his powers declining. Neglecting his own household, he took his pleasure here, there and everywhere, until one evening he visited Golden Lotus in a state of prostration which caused that passionate lady some concern. Surreptitiously, therefore, she made him take three pills at once in a little hot wine. She had her reward at once, "feeling the cloud burst three times"; but soon the rain became a shower, and a bloody shower at that, until finally the unfortunate Hsi-men expired.

When we remember that according to the table of sexual merits and demerits laid down by the strictest Confucian doctrine the reading of a love poem in the presence of a wife earned five bad marks, or twenty if the reading was done on purpose, and that the mere fact of touching a wife's hands while handing her something earned one bad mark, or ten if the touch was directed towards some licentious purpose (the only case in which such contact was proper being to save her from some danger), we may conclude as we read the *Chin-p'ing-mei* that the standards of conduct in ordinary life were as far removed from the ideals of Confucianism as they were from the principles of Taoism or Buddhism. Again, when we consider that the gravest offences, earning fifty bad marks, are to maintain an excessive number of wives and concubines, to go on gambling parties with friends and to consort with prostitutes, and then reflect that the best Chinese novels are concerned with little else, we realise how far apart, in China as elsewhere, are the theory and practice of sexual behaviour. The practice is centred on the flute of jade and the woman's skill in handling it. No mention is made of cunnilingus, although this was practised by the adepts of the *tao*. *Intromissio per anum* was employed along with masturbation, the practice being known as "academicians' ways", *han-lin fung*. In practising paederasty Hsi-men was following an ancient tradition which is attested throughout the whole course of Chinese history and is discussed by the ninth century Arab author of the *Akhbar as-Sin wa'l Hind* ("The Chinese















practise sodomy with young slave boys who are kept for this purpose"). Lesbianism was practised among women, and there were even sisterhoods of fanatical lesbians who swore to kill any of their number who should commit the treason of going with a man. In short, most forms of sexual activity flourished in China as in other countries; the women's quarters were racked by jealousy, while the maidservants shared their master's bed.

The novels also tell us something of the part played by brothels in the sexual life of the Chinese. As in Europe, there were different classes of establishment. On the lowest level were the "tiled gardens" (*wa-tsu kou-lan*), broadly equivalent to those places in the West where the customers practically queue up at the entrance, pay a modest sum, and discharge their sperm into a body which is then immediately ready for the next client. These houses were run by the State, and both the whores who sold their bodies and the men who bought them were held in equal contempt.

On a higher level were the "drink-shops" (*chiu-lou*), which might be run either by the State or by private persons. Only officials were admitted to the State-run establishments; other customers had to go to the houses run by procuresses on their own account. The fare provided was abundant and of good quality, and upstairs were the cubicles in which the girls did their business. The horses and chariots of the clients would congregate at the entrances to these establishments, under the lantern of red silk. At the summit of the hierarchy were the *ch'a fang* or "tea-houses". It was to these that men of authority, artists and rich merchants like Hsi-men went to seek diversion from domesticity. Men could ruin themselves in these houses, elegantly and in style: a maidenhead cost a fortune. Well heated in winter, cooled in summer by blocks of ice melting in a basin, richly supplied with furniture and works of art, these houses — which are known to us from the detailed descriptions left by Chou Mi, a connoisseur of these matters who lived at the end of the thirteenth century — offered their clients women of refinement who could sing, dance and converse in the most agreeable and cultured way. A woman might sometimes be granted the privilege of choosing her partner, and when he was of high standing might reserve him for herself. To gain some idea of what the Chinese tea-houses were like under the T'ang and Sung dynasties, and even later, we must think of the Japanese geisha houses rather than of our city brothels. However charming the inmates of the more fashionable Western houses of ill fame may have been, they were never musicians, dancers and poetesses such as the tea-houses of China could offer.



Often enough a wealthy man in search of a wife would buy one of these girls, paying sweetly for the privilege — just as in present-day Japan a geisha can still be bought for this purpose.

The first account by a European of the courtesans of China was brought back by Marco Polo. He describes the girls of Cambaluc (Khan Baliq, the Mongol capital, on the site later occupied by Peking): "They all live in the suburbs. And you must know that there are such a great multitude of them that no man would credit it; and I warrant that they are full twenty thousand in number, all serving men for money and drawing their subsistence therefrom. And I tell you too that they are maintained there by reason of the great number of foreigners and merchants who come and go there every day. They have a captain-general, and there is an overseer for every hundred and for every thousand, who are responsible to the general. And the reason why these women have a captain is this: every time ambassadors come to the Great Khan's court on business and are lodged at his expense — and indeed they are provided for in the most agreeable manner — this captain is required to furnish one harlot each night to the said ambassadors and to each man in their suites; and she is not paid for her labours, for such is the tax these women pay to the Great Khan." At Kinsai (now Hangchow) the Venetian is equally impressed: "In other streets reside the harlots, of whom there are so many that I dare not say the number; and they live not only near the squares or the stations specially assigned to them, but also in other parts of the city." (In this they differed from the harlots of Cambaluc). "They live in great state, with many perfumes and great numbers of maids, and their houses are finely decorated. These women are greatly skilled and experienced in flattering and wheedling all who come to them with fair words matched to every kind of person. And foreigners who have once dallied with them are so taken by their sweetness and charm that they can never forget them. Thus it is that when they return to their homes they say that they have been at Kinsai, that is the City of Heaven, and they long for the day when they may return there."

A weighty testimonial to the standards achieved by the better class of prostitution! Marco Polo also tells how boats could be hired on the Western Lake for a pleasure trip with women or friends: "The boats are supplied with the best wines and the most exquisite sweetmeats. And so those who sail on the lake enjoy themselves in this wise, for they have no other thought than to concern themselves with the pleasure of their body and the delights of feasting in company... The people of the city think of nothing



else, after they have finished their work or their business, but to spend part of the day with their women-folk or with courtesans, enjoying a gay life in the boats, or in carriages round the city."

On the floating brothels so characteristic of southern China we have a later account, equally informative, in G. Schlegel's *Histoire de la prostitution en Chine* (1880), which is confirmed by Maurice Jametel in his description of the flower-decked boats of Canton about 1880 (*La Chine inconnue*, 1884). These were luxurious establishments patronised by men of letters, poets and musicians, which made a not inconsiderable contribution to the development of song-writing and music.

(Incidentally, the southern Chinese of the present day seem to have remained more faithful to their erotic tradition than the Chinese of the north. A Chinese Communist once wrote to assure me that as a southerner he was glad that I did not approve of the contemporary mood of puritanism — which he hoped was only a passing phase — and that I was able to appreciate the old art of love as it was taught by the Simple Young Girl).

In fact, until 1949 and the advent of Chairman Mao the old traditions of the Chinese courtesans were maintained more or less as they had been known since the time of the T'ang dynasty. The *Pei-li-chih* of Sun Ch'i (*Anecdotes of the Northern District*, translated by Howard S. Levy as *The Gay Quarters of Ch'ang-an*), is a collection of real-life accounts which confirm both the skill of these courtesans (who were not all Taoist priestesses or nuns!) and the social function they performed in Chinese society. At Ch'ang-an in those days it was the regular habit of scholars who had been successful in the State examination, officials and ministers to visit these houses in quest of a little rest and relaxation enlivened by singing, music, poetry and conversation.

This does not mean that the prostitutes of Shanghai between 1920 and 1940 were in the same intellectual class as the courtesans whose exploits are recounted in the *Pei-li-chih*; but, as if to show that they belonged to the same tradition, an ink-stand and a few brushes would be left lying casually on a table to suggest to any customer or visitor that they were women of culture.

Thus Chinese eroticism, originally derived from a sentiment which can only be described as religious, took on a secular and indeed a profane colouring in its literary expression. Under the Ming and Manchu dynasties the cycle was completed. Accordingly Mr Van Gulik, the most penetrating student of the sexual manners of China, author of *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* and *Sexual Life in Ancient*



*China*, is right in concluding his study at the end of the Ming dynasty, in 1644. At that period the influence of Europe was already making itself powerfully felt: the Jesuits were already established at the court of Peking, constantly battling against the other Catholic orders and the Protestant or Orthodox embassies, taking on the guise of mathematicians, natural philosophers or clockmakers in order to insinuate the religious and sexual values of Europe. Auricular confession was repugnant to Chinese feeling, and to begin with Christianity made extremely slow progress; but at last a number of princes and high officials were converted (sometimes being won over by Euclid's geometry in a Chinese translation which bore the monogram of Christ — from which it was a short step to the acceptance of the Gospels). It would be interesting to determine exactly what part was played in this change of attitudes by the missions, how far Confucian puritanism was responsible, and how much was due to the pox. Once the practice of love began all too frequently to be followed by the malady known in China as the "Canton disease" or the "plum-blossom disease" it is easy to understand why the life of the flesh, hitherto innocent, might become a suspect or hazardous activity.

We must not, however, overstate the part played by syphilis or by the Christian missions, for long before these factors came into play the prudishness of the Confucians had already achieved the destruction of the pictures illustrating the Taoist manuals. Accordingly, although we possess a number of ancient treatises on eroticism and a whole literature of libertinism, no erotic paintings have come down to us from the early period.

Originally the pictures were designed to illustrate works of what would now be called sex education. The originals seem to have been lost during the T'ang period, and thereafter erotic pictures were used for pleasure at least as much as for instruction, and special albums of such pictures were produced. We know practically nothing of this art before the Ming period, except for a few very clumsily drawn couples in the act of coitus. At the beginning of the Ming period the artists confined themselves to scenes showing couples fully dressed, which are unintelligible to the European unless he knows that the verbs "write" and "embroider", for example, have the secondary meaning of "make love" (referring respectively to the man and the woman), so that the figure of a man engaged in grinding ink or a woman stitching a tapestry represent an expression of desire which is all the more intense for being allusive. Under the influence of the realistic or libertine novels which have been discussed above,



certain circles in Nanking encouraged the rebirth of erotic painting and drawing. From 1570 to 1580 the artists worked with four colours (black and blue being the dominant colours, with green and red as subsidiary colours); between 1606 and 1624 the finest albums were produced, using five colours (black, blue, red, green and yellow). Soon afterwards there was a return to monochrome prints, either in blue or in black. It was a fugitive art which in its perfection lasted less than twenty years and soon degenerated.

Whereas the Japanese erotic prints are abundant and fairly well known in Europe, the erotic art of China is less familiar. Even the illustrations to the *Jou p'u-tuan* or the *Chin-p'ing-mei* are difficult to get hold of. There were originally twenty-four illustrations to the *Prayer Mat of Flesh*; but according to Dr Wu-shan Sheng, author of an *Erotology of China*, all that survives of this album is a single set of photographs dating from the nineteenth century, which he reproduces, but with retouching introduced by the Christian censorship. The originals of a series of illustrations to the *Chin-p'ing-mei*, found in 1930 in a former palace of the Manchu Emperors, were lost between 1939 and 1945. The reproductions of these pictures can be compared with the two hundred woodcuts done for an eighteenth century edition which has found its way to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Finally, reproductions of erotic prints from independent collections are very rare indeed: apart from the few examples in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* there is only, so far as I know, the volume published by the Cercle du Livre Précieux, Paris, with reproductions in colour on silk.

It is notable that in the pictures of this kind which have come down to us all the female figures, even when they are naked, keep their slippers on while making love, whereas the men are sometimes depicted at their sport with bare feet; and this may lead us to consider the characteristic Chinese custom of foot-binding.

According to a fourteenth century source quoted by Jacques Gernet in his *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion* (English translation by H.M. Wright, London, 1962), "the custom of binding the feet first appeared under the Five Dynasties (10th c.) and was not widely adopted before the reign-periods *Hsi-ning* and *Yüan-fu* (1068–1085). But recently this fashion has become so common that it is considered shameful not to adopt it." Whatever may be the historical origin of a custom which still remains puzzling to the Westerner, it was certainly very much in vogue under the Ming and Ch'ing



文女



文武人



武生





dynasties, the period of the erotic prints. The bound foot seems to have been completely taboo, so that if a man touched a woman's foot and was not rebuffed he might reasonably expect to be admitted to further favours. The prohibition apparently extended to ordinary unbound feet as well, apart from those of servants and certain goddesses (for example Kuan-yin). Some authors maintain that foot-binding was a custom advocated by the Confucians with the object of confining wives to the women's quarters, while others have supposed that the awkward and unnatural gait imposed by the "golden lotuses" (the bound feet), or affected out of coquetry, promoted the development of the vaginal reflexes. Contemporary medical authorities (in particular Huard and Wong) believe that little firm evidence has been produced of the modifications in pelvic structure which have sometimes been cited in support of this hypothesis.

Whatever the inconveniences of foot-binding, the wives of the Manchus were much chagrined, and almost driven to rebellion, when in 1644 they were forbidden to imitate the custom to which the women of their subject people were so attached. The Manchu rulers, however, were right; and for once they were in agreement with the Communists, who were quick to prohibit this form of torture when they came to power three centuries later. When it is considered that the effect of foot-binding is to produce, at the cost of much suffering to its possessor, an artificial club foot — a painful, festering, gangrenous stump at the end of a deformed calf — even those who regret that our way of life and perhaps our pattern of diet is giving our women larger and flatter feet must surely agree with the Manchu Emperors and the Chinese Communist Party in this. Contrary to what was thought in Europe in the nineteenth century, however, the Chinese woman's club foot — a feature introduced at a relatively late date — had no connection with what were and are the essential elements in Chinese erotic practice — the theory of *yin* and *yang*, the use of *coitus reservatus*, the concern with the pleasure of the female partner, the innocent acceptance of the joys of the flesh.



## VI. FROM EROTICISM TO LOVE

It may be admitted that amorous sentiment varies in some degree according to religion, social class and the character of the particular individual; and a Chinese man or woman of the Chou period would no doubt react differently in this respect from a twentieth century Chinese, monogamous and a Communist. Some writers have maintained that the system of sororal polygyny practised by Chinese nobles two thousand five hundred years ago, requiring the family into which a man of noble birth was marrying to supply him with a specified number of wives according to his rank, all bearing the same name, and the practice in vogue at a rather later date, under which a nobleman could take several wives from different branches of the same family, obviated disputes in the women's quarters and the always painful and sometimes fatal effects of jealousy. "Among the women taken to wife in a single marriage," writes Marcel Granet, "there was an order of precedence, established before the marriage and confirmed by it. This made possible a discipline which rendered it more difficult for one particular wife to obtain excessive influence by virtue of her beauty. But the main advantage was that, since all the wives came from the same family and consequently represented the same interests in the external world, the rivalries which might arise between them could not lead to a situation of anarchy, for they did not become enlarged into conflicts between families." In women's quarters based on a system of polygyny, an ancient text tells us, "the women have no feeling of mutual jealousy in their hearts." In those days, according to Granet, "each of the wives knew in advance... what the pattern of her sexual life would be, provided



















that the principal wife exercised proper supervision." In consequence the women had no sense of jealousy nor "any personal feeling".

When the practice of polygyny was given up and wives were taken from different families and at different times, the inhabitants of the women's quarters no longer enjoyed the same sisterly relationship. Each of the wives sought to promote her own interests, to win the senses and the heart of her husband. "There was now nothing to stop them using their charms to seduce their master. Each of them sought to please, to arouse a love directed towards herself, a passion based on a personal feeling for her, a sentiment which was exclusive and would give rise to jealousy. In the court poetry which flowered in the sumptuous harems we note the emergence of personal feelings which were lacking in the old folk poetry, reflecting the *dramas passionnels* which were already common in the upper ranks of the nobility." We need not accept this theory of Marcel Granet's without reserve, for we find *femmes fatales* and fatal passions mentioned in the records from the earliest times. About the year 1800 before our era, did not the Emperor Chieh, last ruler of the Hsia dynasty, destroy himself for love of Mo Hsi? "He could not escape divine punishment," says Me-tsu. Along with the last ruler of the Shang dynasty, Chou-sin (1154-1122 B.C.), Chieh was frequently quoted by scholars as the type of the sovereign brought to disaster, and the downfall of his dynasty, by love for a woman. Thus Lo Pin-wang, a contemporary of Wu Tse-t'ien's, writes: "When the dragon's slaver became Empress, then it was seen that the Empire was nearing its end." By the woman "born of the dragon's slaver" we must understand Pao-ssu, the celebrated favourite of king Yu (781-771 B.C.). She was a woman who never laughed; and to amuse her Yu gave orders to light the bonfires which signalled a barbarian invasion. The faithful vassals rallied at once to the defence of the kingdom, whereupon Pao-ssu at last burst out laughing. Later, when the invaders came in real earnest, the bonfires were lit again; but this time the vassals paid no attention, and Yu was defeated and killed. In writing of Pao-ssu, however, Lo Pin-wang was also criticising Chao Fei-yen, "Flying Swallow", the favourite and later the wife of the Emperor Ch'eng of the Former Han dynasty, who, being herself barren, killed all the children born to the wives in the royal harem; and in referring to these baneful women and calamitous rulers he was seeking to incite the Chinese to rebel against another woman with "the heart of a snake and a scorpion", the "Emperor" Wu Tse-t'ien.



Whatever one may think of the influence of sororal polygyny on the sentiment of love, it is established at any rate that from the earliest times some heads were turned in China, and others fell, through the working of the passions and of jealousy.

China could also, of course, show examples of faithful lovers, like those recorded in the biography of the courtesan Li Wa, or the case of Yang Ki-sheng and his wife in the sixteenth century. Yang Ki-sheng's wife begged the Emperor to have her put to death in place of her husband: "The crime is grave, and if it is beyond pardon I desire to be arrested forthwith and have my head cut off in the market square of the capital city, substituting myself for my husband in readiness for death."

In short, the Chinese conception of love does not seem to have been very different, for the corresponding social class and mental level, from what it was in later civilisations — our own, for example. We may, however, note one difference: it can happen with us that a poet with one hand celebrates his love in Petrarchan terms, while with the other he furtively botches up a piece of priapic or merely smutty versifying. Because of the Judeo-Christian anathema on sex we only rarely achieve that pagan innocence which the Greeks, no less than the Chinese, enjoyed: "Heaven itself is aflame to penetrate the body of Earth," writes Aeschylus, using an expression which might have come from the pen of a Chinese Taoist.

In Chinese poetry the erotic element, usually very discreetly expressed, can barely be distinguished from the expression of love. This can be demonstrated by considering three of the popular songs known as *yueh-fu*. Take, for example, the following lines:

The window is open on a moonlit autumn night.  
The candle is blown out, the silk tunic undone.  
A gurgle of laughter under the bed curtains;  
And all her body has the perfume of a tuberose.

These verses, which are regarded as "erotic", celebrate carnal love without self-consciousness but without coarseness. (It should be noted, incidentally, that the use of the word "tuberose" for the flower known in Chinese as *huei-lan* or *lan-huei* may suggest a headier perfume than the original. But since the Chinese plant is a heavily scented orchid which grows in damp places — that is, in places that



are *yin* — while for us the orchid is mainly a luxury flower appreciated for its appearance rather than its perfume, the term seems to render more aptly the kind of sensibility involved here).

Consider also these lines:

An autumn night; a cool wind blows;  
High in the sky the stars shine, and the moon.  
The room is scented; the lady is at her toilet.  
Under the silk curtain she awaits the mutual joys of love.

Or these:

The autumn is cool, the window is open; they rest.  
The moon slants down its brilliant light.  
It is midnight: not a word is spoken.  
Only two laughing voices under the curtain of silk.

All the delights of the bedroom are in these poems, but by suggestion only: there is no over-statement, not a word to which exception could be taken. It is a far cry from the priapic verbosity of Ronsard, Malherbe or Verlaine.

After these three songs, which probably date from the first four or five centuries of our era, we may consider a *ts'u* by Liu Yung. This poet was born shortly before the year 1000 and died in 1050, mourned only, it is said, by the courtesans who paid for his funeral. At that period, under the Sung dynasty, a new poetic form was developed, the *ts'u*. These were poems in a free verse form, in complete contrast to the strict regularity of earlier verse, designed to be sung to well known tunes. The following example, a more sustained poem than the three *yueh-fu* just quoted, was sung to the tune known as *P'o-lo-men-ling*:

Last night I went to bed as I was, fully dressed; and tonight again I have come to bed as I am, fully dressed. I had been drinking, and spent the first watch dead drunk. It is past midnight: what is it that wakes me? An icy chill, a drizzling rain beats against my ill-fitting window; my lamp quavers and flickers. In my lonely bed I turn and twist, hot in pursuit of my moist dream. Close pressed as I am to my pillow, I have difficulty in pursuing it. My mind is quite confused: how close they are, and yet how distant, that beautiful landscape and that limpid sky! In vain we think of one another with mutual sympathy: we do not manage our business with mutual sympathy.



The very exact Chinese expression used in this poem — *yun-yu mung*, a compound of the set phrase *yun-yu* with *mung*, "dream" — is the despair of the translator, embodying as it does the literary allusion which has already been discussed. If we render it literally as "dream of clouds and rain", the Western reader will make nothing of the phrase. The term "moist dream" is perhaps a little too specific; and certainly the alternative of "lascivious dream" would be too strong. Since we lack any proper equivalent for *yun-yu*, therefore, we must fall back on a translation which puts too much stress on the phrase — the only phrase in the poem which is genuinely, though discreetly, erotic. As M. Demiéville observes, "there is an endless variety of set phrases, in varying degrees of euphemism, referring to matters of amorous concern"; and among these expressions, which any Chinese would understand at the merest hint, are included "the moonlit nights of mid-autumn, so beautiful at the equinox in the monsoon countries, where special celebrations are held so that they may be enjoyed to the full." Thus the moonlit autumn nights referred to in the *yueh-fu* quoted above are no mere empty phrases but have a precise significance.

Between the poems which can be regarded as erotic and those which are clearly love poems there is an infinite range of gradations. To exemplify this we may take three poems by the dramatist Kuan Han-ch'ing, who lived under the Yuan dynasty in the mid thirteenth century, shortly before the time of Marco Polo.

## I

Clouds of my tresses, mists on my temple, blacker than the wings of a crow...  
 My golden lotuses are but half concealed, veiled in scarlet gauze.  
 I am no common flower which grows outside the garden.  
 I curse you, my handsome beloved enemy!  
 Half I succumb; half I merely pretend.

## II

Outside the windows hung with blue gauze, silence: no one there.  
 Kneeling at the foot of my bed, he burns to embrace me.  
 I curse this inconstant heart, and yet I turn towards him.  
 Heaping reproaches on him and reviling him,  
 Half I repulse him; half I yield.



### III

The light of the silver lamp is out, the spirals of incense are dispersed.  
I slip within the silk of the curtains, eyes drowned with tears, alone.  
What languor when I lie on my couch, now so solitary!  
The thin coverlet seems still thinner to me,  
Half warm, half cold.\*\*

Are these love poems, or are they erotic poems? The answer is that they are both, indissolubly. Frequently, too, a reference seems to us erotic only because we interpret it in terms of our own attitudes. As an example of this we may take the hackneyed theme of the "girl of fifteen":

#### THE CORNET OF THE GUARDS

Hsin Yen-nien

Once there was, among the people of Huo,  
A handsome cornet, Fung Tsu-tu.  
Relying on his master's credit, this bold fellow  
Toyed with the landlady of the inn.  
She, a barbarian girl of fifteen years,  
Sat alone at her counter, wearing her spring attire.  
A skirt with long pleats, a double-ended belt,  
Puffed sleeves and a generous display of bosom.  
In her hair were jades from Lan-t'ien,  
And Arabian pearls in her ears.  
Decked in this way, how elegant they were,  
Her two coils of hair, unequalled in their day!\*\*

(The "Tune of the Prince of Lang-yeh" dates from the time of the Liang dynasty, 502-556. It is thought to have originated in the prefecture of Lang-yeh in Shantung. It was sung to the accompaniment of transverse flutes and cornets).



A girl of fifteen, in the country of Liao-tung,  
Skilled at the guitar, at singing and dancing,  
Plays us the song of the frontiers on the barbarian flute.  
And now in our three armies the tears flow like rain.\*\*

#### THE MONGOL GIRL OF FIFTEEN

Chang Hsien (14th century)

The Mongol girl of fifteen  
Is a peony just come into bud.  
Where can she be met with?  
In Ping-chou's wine-shop,  
Her cheeks are as full as an April sun,  
Her eyebrows curved like distant mountains.  
Her slightest smile denotes consent...  
Then why should she hide behind her fan of gauze?\*\*\*

The beauty of Lo-yang, heroine of a famous ballad written by Wang Wei (701-761), is no older than this, and is already married:

The beauty of Lo-yang lives in the house across the way.  
I can see from her face that she is barely fifteen.  
Her husband holds a bridle of jade and rides a piebald horse;  
The maid chops up the carp on a golden dish.\*\*

Among girls of fifteen those of the country of Wu were particularly famous, both for their beauty and their skill as courtesans. Their qualities are celebrated in the following poem by Li Po:

#### A GLASS OF WINE

A gilded cup filled with wine from the grape,  
A girl of Wu, no more than fifteen,  
Too delicate still to be enjoyed,  
She speaks badly, but her singing is a delight.  
Eyebrows painted and plucked, embroidered red slippers,  
Her plaits with their tortoiseshell ornaments,  
How they would ravish the heart!  
Under the curtains painted with water-lily flowers  
How could one resist?







Fei Ssu-huang returns to the same theme in the eighteenth century:

THE BEAUTY OF WU OFFERS WINE

The beauty of Wu is fifteen years old, with floating hair;  
Her cup of jade invites the guest to enjoy the wine from the grape.\*\*

But, if we come to think of it, how old were the heroines of our eighteenth century novels in the West? Manon Lescaut was fifteen years old — exactly the same age as the girls of Wu — and the heroines of the *Chevalier de Faublas* are not much older. Exhausted by too much child-bearing, lacking the services of a good dentist, a woman was worn out by the time she was thirty, in those days when the expectation of life was not much more than thirty-five. Hence, understandably enough, the early age at which they were ripe for love.

These poems of desire for young girls are matched, throughout the history of Chinese literature, by poems devoted to the sadness of separation. This takes many forms. First, separation after the enjoyment of mutual love:

TO THE TUNE OF "THE BARBARIAN BODHISATTVAS"

Wei Chuang

In the red pavilion, the nocturnal sadness of separation...  
The lamp emits its perfume behind the fringes of the half-lowered curtains.  
But the moment has come when the moon sinks low: it is time to go.  
With beautiful tear-stained face, she bids me farewell.  
On the strings of the guitar, inlaid with gold and sinople,  
The young oriole sings,  
Inviting me to return before the dawn...  
Sitting at the green casement, she is like a flower.\*\*

Then there is the case of enforced separation. At an open window in Ch'ang-an, Fu Tu thinks of his wife and children, far away in Fu-chou:

Yes, tonight at Fu-chou it is moonlight;  
But my wife must look at the moon alone.  
Far away, I think tenderly of my sons and my daughters,  
Too young to understand what keeps me at Ch'ang-an.  
The scented mist moistens her soft hair,



And the hard light freezes her perfect arms,  
Ah! When shall we two, sitting at the bare window,  
Gaze on it together and dry our tears?

The main cause of separation, of course, is war:

#### LAMENT OF THE WOMEN'S QUARTERS

Kiang Tsung

In the silence, beside the road, a blue pavilion;  
Under the satin window, an abundance of white snow;  
On the pond the teal huddle closely together;  
Under the curtains, the scent-bags have not been filled.  
The screen seeks to hold back the moonlight;  
The shameless lamp throws its light on a lonely sleeper.  
East of the Liao, the water is frozen, and spring will be lacking in vigour;  
North of the Ki, the goose flies many thousand furlongs on its way here.  
"Ah! May you soon cross the mountains and passes  
And remember the peach-blossom and plum-blossom of my brief beauty!"\*\*

In Chinese poetry the loose belt is a frequent symbol of the wasting away of a wife or concubine waiting patiently for the absent lover:

Would you like to know how much I think of you?  
Just look at my belt: how loose it is!\*\*

Or again:

Day by day the waist of my silk dress grows smaller.  
The peach-blossom and plum-blossom have faded.  
I think of my lord, but he does not return;  
And when he does come back will he still know me?\*\*\*

The poets tirelessly evoke the sorrow of separation for husband and wife or for two lovers:

This year he will not return.

Or:

He wrote and I replied, saying that our separation has lasted too long.



When we reflect on the enormous area of Imperial China and the slowness of communications we can readily understand that laments of this kind were not merely literary exercises.

If, however, we make allowance for the imagery which may disconcert those who miss its symbolic meaning, and for the literary allusions which are so difficult for the foreigner to follow, the expression of love in China is not so different from our own approach as to be incomprehensible to us.

When we read the *Dream of the Red Chamber* we realise that the author of this masterpiece is depicting love as we too know it. Whether Pao-yu, the hero, is dreaming of enjoying a fairy who will tell him all the secrets of the "clouds" and the "rain"; or hurrying to put into practice, with the help of a maid-servant, the judicious recipes of Taoist eroticism; or involved in a tormenting love affair with his cousin, in the course of which he invariably says the opposite of what he means — "And indeed it has always been and always will be so with lovers", comments the author, showing that he knows the technique of the unspoken conversation — he is caught up in an intricate web of emotional and sensual complications which reminds us of Marivaux, Dostoevsky or Proust.

And when we read the six surviving chapters of the tale of Shen Fu (translated by Lin Yutang under the title *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*) we realise that if we want to understand the Chinese approach to eroticism and to love it is not enough to know by heart the *Jou p'u-tuan* and the *Chin-p'ing-mei*. In what other literature can we find a more faithful and less conventional picture of conjugal love? The young woman, Yun, is undoubtedly Shen Fu's equal in heart and mind. Modest and yet sensual, cultivated, thoughtful and affectionate, yet at the same time irreverent and outspoken, she is altogether charming. Neither their difficulties with parents in law, nor the malevolence of the world, nor poverty can defeat the mutual love of this couple. When Yun dies, on the 30th March 1803, her husband is only forty. She enjoins him to find another wife, a beautiful and virtuous woman, but he steadfastly refuses: "If we must indeed part midway in our journey, then be assured that I shall never think of remarrying. For those who have known the Ocean, what lesser water is worthy of the name? And for those who have contemplated the clouds on the Mountain of Shamans, what else is there that could deserve the name of cloud?" Here love and eroticism are bound up in a single sentiment.

Based on a metaphysical system which is incompatible with Christianity, developed in an Empire whose social structures and moral values were quite different from ours, Chinese erotic thought never-



theless produced poems, novels and plays in which husbands and wives, lovers and those in love speak in terms which have a direct appeal to us. In these works sexual instincts and sexual techniques are given expression in a form in which — gratefully, with some surprise, but with delight — we can recognise what is, after all, a universal manifestation of human nature.







## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 3-16 *Scroll. Water colour on paper. Unsigned. 16th-17th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng)
- 18-21 *Water colours on silk. Unsigned. 17th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng).
- 23-35 *Illustrations from a work published in the Ming period. Unsigned. 16th-17th century.*
- 37-40 *Water colours on paper. Unsigned. 17th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng).  
*Illustrations from a work on "ladies' occupations". Unsigned. Ming period. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 52-59 *Water colours on silk. Unsigned. 17th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng).
- 60-71 *Illustrations from an album of twenty-four pictures in colours on silk entitled Yen-ts'in yi ts'ing, "Intimate Scenes of Leisurely Love". Ascribed to the Ming artist Ch'iu Ying (about 1550). The plates reproduced here are taken from a collotype reprint published by the I-yüan Chen-Shang-She in Shanghai. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 73-81 *Water colours on silk. Unsigned. 17th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng).
- 82-91 *"Chinese Beauties". Album of twelve plates, seven of which are reproduced. The first of the plates is signed and dated: "drawn by Tsao-Tsepan, Tsong Cheng period (Ming), sixth year, seven month" (1633). (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 93-100 *Prints. Unsigned. 18th-19th century.*
- 102-108 *Illustrations from a work published in the Ming period. Unsigned. 16th-17th century.*
- 110-122 *Prints. Unsigned. 18th-19th century (?)*.
- 124-125 *Ch'uen-siao t'eu-leu t'u, "Pictures of Revelations of a Night in Spring". Painting by Che K'o. Middle of 10th century.*
- 127-130 *Painted scroll. Unsigned. 19th century.*
- 132-138 *Painted paper scroll. Unsigned. 18th century (?)*. (Ph. G. Bertin).
- 140-141 *Paintings on parchment of foetus skin, apparently designed as transparencies (e.g. on a light shade). Ming period. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 142-147 *Ivory statuettes. Ming and Kien-Lung periods. 18th century. The one on p. 145 is a "working model" of childbirth: when the head of the figure was pressed a spring action caused the child to emerge. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 148 *"Silk paintings". End of 17th century. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 149 *"Ivory panel". 17th-18th century (?)*. (Ph. Wango Weng).
- 150, 156 *Playing cards. 18th century. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 159-162 *"Distorted pictures". Oil or painting on silk. 17th-18th century. (Ph. G. Bertin).*
- 169 *Porcelain statuette: lady at her toilet. Famille rose. 18th century. (Ph. G. Bertin).*







## CONTENTS

PUBLISHER'S NOTE .....	5
I. THE FLUTE OF JADE .....	7
II. A SIMPLE YOUNG GIRL .....	33
III. A LESS SIMPLE WOMAN: THE LADY PAN .....	52
IV. A COMPLEX FEMALE PERSONALITY: WU TSE-T'EN .....	102
V. EROTICISM AND THE ARTS .....	139
VI. FROM EROTICISM TO LOVE .....	158
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	175



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